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BERTA ROJAS

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6 SONGS TO PLAY

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WHAT'S GOING ON

MICHAEL HEDGES
BREAKFAST IN THE FIELD

STEVE BAUGHMAN
SILENT NIGHT

JON STICKLEY
BLACKBERRY BLOSSOM

AND MORE

YOUNG AT ART

5 NEXT-GEN LUTHIERS TALK SHOP

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CONTENTS



MARTÍN CRESPO

"I am talking about equal opportunities for women using the examples of Presti and Anido. They traveled the world and wrote music in a time when that wasn't the role of women."

– BERTA ROJAS

p. 22

Features

16 Discovering Michael Hedges
Andy McKee, Kaki King, Christie Lenée, and Mike Dawes reflect on the guitar revolutionary's impact and legacy
By Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers

22 In their Footsteps
Berta Rojas celebrates classical guitar pioneers Ida Presti and María Luisa Anido
By Mark Small

Special Focus
Next-Gen Luthiers

28 Five guitar makers 30 and under share their stories and talk shop
By Kate Koenig

Miscellany

10 The Front Porch
12 Community
76 Luthiers' Row
81 Ad Index

November/December 2022
Volume 33, No. 3, Issue 337

On the Cover
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CONTENTS

Taylor 724ce, p. 70



COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS

SETUP

14 Guitar Talk
Alternative tunings master Glenn Jones on his writing process and modified capos
By Emile Menasché

PLAY

38 Here's How
Building better body awareness will help your playing
By Judy Minot

40 The Basics
Adding variety to basic strumming patterns
By Cathy Fink

44 Woodshed
Create compelling accompaniments and solos for old folk, blues, and gospel songs
By Happy Traum

48 Weekly Workout
Fun and challenging counterpoint exercises
By Sean McGowan

SONGS

54 Acoustic Classic: What's Going On
An unplugged version of Marvin Gaye's R&B masterpiece
By Adam Perlmutter

56 Acoustic Classic: Breakfast in the Field
An evocative composition from Michael Hedges' debut album
By Adam Perlmutter

58 Acoustic Classic: Silent Night
Open-D bottleneck treatment of the beloved Christmas carol
By Steve Baughman

60 World Premiere: Clandestino (Elegy for a Cheesemonger)
How Adam Levy turned a writing prompt into a gorgeous solo guitar meditation
By Adam Perlmutter

62 Pickin': Blackberry Blossom
Jon Stickley's imaginative take on an evergreen bluegrass melody
By Alan Barnosky

66 Campfire: Low Bridge, Everybody Down
A nostalgic folk song from the 19th century
By Maurice Tani

AG TRADE

68 Ask the Expert
Can a budget guitar be transformed into something better?
By Martin Keith

70 Review: Taylor 724ce
Stunning all-koa Grand Auditorium guitar with exceptional warmth and balance
By Greg Olwell

72 Review: Takamine CRN-TS1
Stage-ready dreadnought is both loud and lyrical
By Emile Menasché

74 Review: Schertler Giulia X
Compact, straightforward amp boasts plenty of great tones
By Mark Goldenberg

MIXED MEDIA

78 Playlist
Reviews of Jesse Terry's wide-ranging covers project, plus albums by Phish frontman Trey Anastasio, Mary Gauthier, Cristina Vane, Scott Metzger, the Slocan Ramblers, and Lily Henley

82 Great Acoustics
Two new guitars and a ukulele from industry icon Dick Boak
By Greg Olwell

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RHYTHM FUNDAMENTALS
Cathy Fink demonstrates some basic strumming patterns and teaches how to use them when playing songs. (p. 40)



TAYLOR 724CE
See and hear this well-balanced all-koa beauty. (p. 70)



MAKING ARRANGEMENTS
Happy Traum's tips for keeping your playing fresh. (p. 44)



"SILENT NIGHT"
Steve Baughman slides into this timeless carol. (p. 58)

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Printed in USA

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THE FRONT PORCH

Michael Hedges



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In recent years, I've been heartened to see so many young artists not just making new and exciting music on the acoustic guitar but building beautiful instruments as well. Up and coming luthiers across the United States, and the world, are making acoustics of startlingly good quality, in a dizzying gamut of styles and designs. And given dwindling resources of classic tonewoods, to say nothing of the overall state of the planet, these artisans hold sustainability as a core value in their building philosophies.

For this issue's special section, contributing writer Kate Koenig profiles a select group of luthiers 30 and under, based in North America and in Europe. Brian Itzkin, Oliver Marchant, Eve Meister, Max Spohn, and Olivia Elia share the stories of how they found their calling, their preferred building styles and tonewoods, and the bold new directions that they are pursuing. It's an inspiring read, to say the least, and it makes me feel optimistic about the acoustic guitar's future.

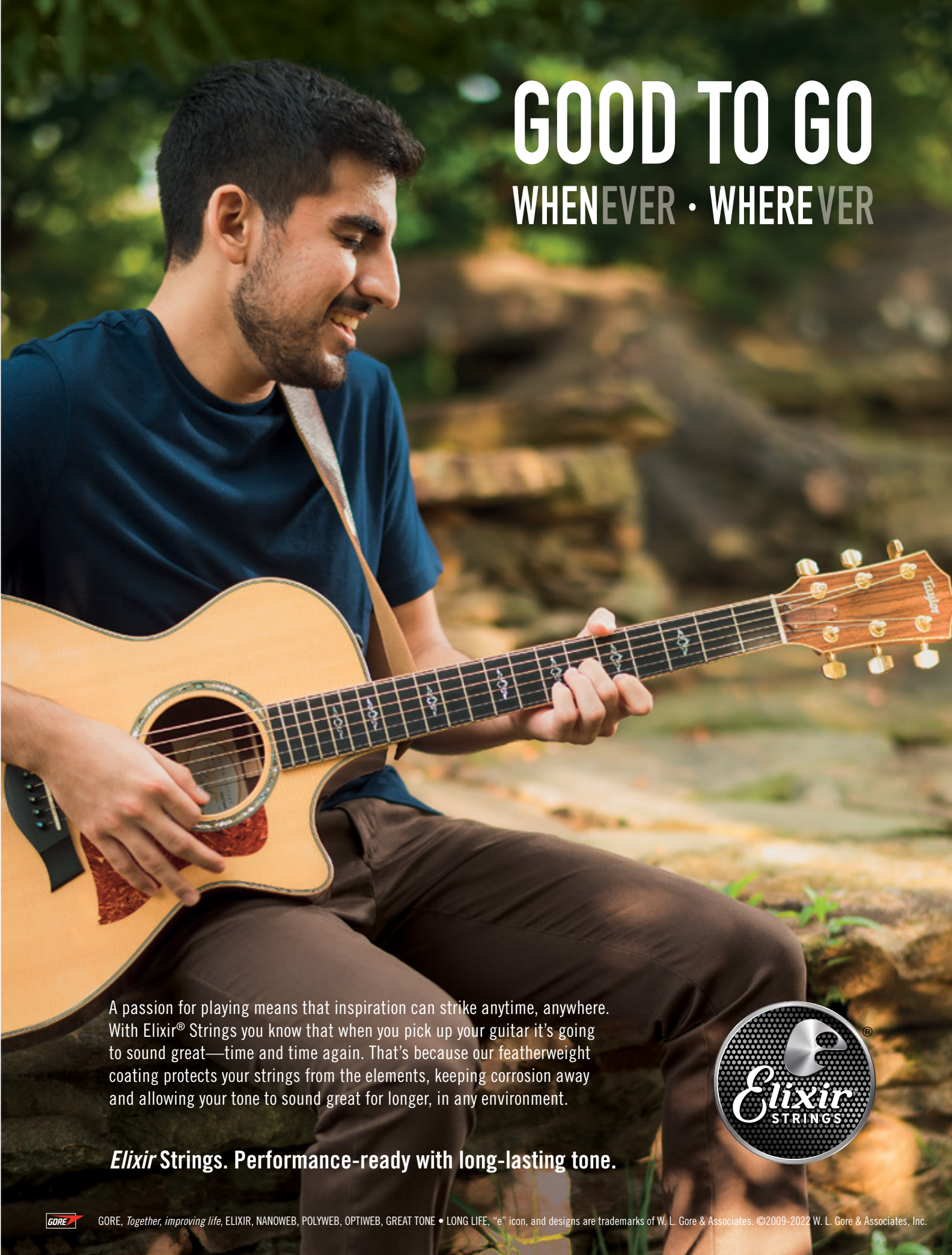
While I have enjoyed getting acquainted with the work of the youngest luthiers, it has also been exciting to see on social media the instruments that industry icon Dick Boak, who recently retired from a decades-long career with C.F. Martin & Co., has been lovingly building in his workshop. In Great Acoustics, editor at large Greg Olwell covers not one but three new Boak creations: an ornately decorated dreadnought, the inspiration for Martin's D-42 Special; a Renaissance-inspired small bodied guitar; and a ukulele made from a stash of quilted maple he'd squirreled away years before. Unfortunately none are for sale.

Just as independent builders are raising the bar in terms of tone and construction, so too are bigger makers like Taylor and Takamine. At press time, Olwell, who has exacting standards in gear, reached out to tell me how much he was enjoying the all-koa Taylor Grand Auditorium 724ce that he reviewed for this issue. Longtime gear writer and music journalist Emile Menasché was similarly effusive about the slope-shouldered, 12-fret dreadnought Takamine CRN-TS1 that he spent some time with.

It's hard to believe that it has been a quarter century since Michael Hedges, the iconoclastic guitarist-composer who with his extended techniques pushed the boundaries of what the steel-string could do, died in a car crash in Northern California. Editor at Large Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers recently chatted with a handful of modern fingerstyle masters—Andy McKee, Kaki King, Christie Lenée, and Mike Dawes—who explained the indelible impact that Hedges' music has had on their own paths as guitarists. As it happens, Rodgers, *AG*'s founding editor, interviewed Hedges in the magazine's early days, and a previously unheard clip from one of their conversations appears on "My First Guitar," the premiere episode in our new podcast series.

One of the first things that drew me to the acoustic guitar was hearing Hedges' treatment of the instrument, particularly on his compositions "Aerial Boundaries" and "Breakfast in the Field." I remember performing the latter in my high school music club, and it was transporting to revisit the piece some 30 years later when transcribing it for one of this issue's Acoustic Classics. If you are new to unorthodox tunings and techniques, you would be doing yourself and your guitar a favor to learn "Breakfast in the Field," as it offers a gentle entry into this mode of playing—and into new ways of looking at your instrument.

—Adam Perlmutter
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GUITAR TALK

Anything But Standard

Alternate tunings master Glenn Jones returns with a very personal musical diary

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

"Playing in an open tuning," says guitarist-composer Glenn Jones, "is a little bit like starting a painting with a canvas that's a certain color."

Jones should know. A trained visual artist heavily influenced by the Piedmont blues he heard as a student at Virginia Commonwealth University, he hasn't used a standard canvas for decades.

As Jones explained when we caught up to discuss his seventh Thrill Jockey release, *Vade Mecum*, he doesn't see open tunings as an alternate to standard, but rather as the core to his approach to playing and composing. "I probably haven't touched standard tuning in over 40 years," he says. "When I first started composing, I found that by using alternate and open tunings I was able to make things that felt like mine."

As he has for decades, the 68-year-old Jones modifies his tunings with partial capos of his own design—a practice that began with his experimental electric band Cul de Sac. But for *Vade Mecum*, he also calls upon a more recent addition to his toolkit: Lowden fan-fret guitars, which, he says, have helped him add to his collection of tunings that already tops triple digits.

Vade Mecum (Latin for "go with me") is Jones' first album since 2018's *The Giant Who Ate Himself and Other New Works for 6 & 12 String Guitar*. He describes it as a personal musical diary, with a timeline straddling the Covid crisis. Originally slated for 2020, it wasn't until May of 2021 that Jones and longtime engineer and collaborator Matthew Azevedo met at a rented house in Maine and unpacked the recording gear, guitars, banjo, and capos and set to work.

But if such a delay might tempt some to build four years of ideas into every composition, Jones gives the music room to breathe. Sometimes austere but never cold, spare but never empty, *Vade Mecum* is rooted in Americana but isn't simply rootsy; it's intelligent without trying to be clever. Jones doesn't need to fill his canvases with splatters of Jackson Pollock color; for him, the space left empty has just as much meaning.

You've described *Vade Mecum* as a musical diary of sorts. Did you compose the title track with that in mind?

The songs kind of grew organically. The opening phrase of "Vade Mecum" just came together. And from that, it was like, "How do I answer that phrase? And what comes next? Should I slow it down? Should I speed it up?" I'll get the germ of an idea and I'll develop it, but I never think in terms of like, "Okay, well, now I need a bridge, or now I need a chorus." It's just the feeling that I need something different.

Your last album came out in 2018. Did it take four years to compose the new material?

Composing a new album usually takes me about a year and a half or two years. I was originally going to record this album in March of 2020. Then the pandemic hit and we had to put off the recording for a year.

In that process, there were a couple of songs that I had ready to record that just kind of fell by the wayside, and new ones took their place. One of them I quite liked, but I can't remember how to play it anymore [*laughs*]! It's gonna come back to me—but it hasn't yet.

Most of my pieces take at least a few months to develop. I'd say about half the album was written during the pandemic. "Forsythia," the second track, probably took me about a year and a half to finish.

When I'm working on a new piece, I'm enthused about it and I'll just focus on that piece—sometimes for weeks or a month—just the one piece, playing it every day and trying to figure out what comes next and how it fits together. But also there are pieces like "Bass Harbor Head," for banjo, which we did as a field recording with birds in the background. My wife, Nora, was going out to pick up coffee and I said, "I'm gonna have a new piece of music when you come back." So I wrote that piece really fast.

Do you finalize your compositions before recording? Or do you edit as you go?

I find the process of listening as you're writing and playing to be different than listening once you're no longer playing. Oftentimes after I've recorded a piece, I'll listen back and think, "Why is *that* section there?" I'll have played that particular section for a year. But it's only when hearing it back—not as a player but as a listener—that I do some additional editing in my own head. Do a take, listen back, and decide a section doesn't really work, or maybe works in a different part of the song. While you're playing a song, it might feel like you're playing fine. But listening back, you kind of feel like, "You know what? I've played this section so many times it's worn out its welcome."

Do you record at home as you write?
Almost never. I probably should. I keep a notebook with my tunings so I at least write the tuning and the partial capo position down. At this point, I've probably invented more than 100 tunings, so I definitely need to keep track of them. I guess it's probably a never-ending road.

The album's liner notes document the instrument, tuning, and capo position for each song. Let's take a look at the title track, performed on a fan-fretted Lowden F32C, tuned C♯ G♯ C♯ C♯ G♯ C♯ with a partial capo. Can you break that down for us?
That's the tuning with the partial capo on the fourth fret of the bottom three strings [i.e., the sixth string is tuned down to A, which sounds as C♯ due to the capo]. The two C♯s in the middle [string 4 capoed and string 3 open] are in unison but are played in different places on the neck. The G string is tuned down to C♯.

Do you choose specific guitars for specific tunings?
I got into the Lowdens after reading an article about how the fanned frets worked and [hoping] it could allow me to come up with a few more tunings that would allow me to tune the low strings down even lower. On the new album, I used them on most of the tracks. There's also an Alvarez Yairi DYM with a cedar top that I use on "John Jackson of Fairfax, Virginia." I love the sound of cedar-top guitars and have a few of them. So I just used the Alvarez because it worked nicely on that song, which is very bluesy.

What other instruments are you using these days?
I have a fair number of Guilds. I didn't really know the brand before I discovered one of their 12-strings. It was the best sounding 12-string I had ever heard. Guilds are very punchy and have very quick decay. And if you're playing a fast fingerpicking style, a long-decaying guitar can get a little muddy sounding. I only discovered from playing Guilds that what I liked was the quick decay—there was a sharp attack, but not a lot of rumbling around inside the guitar after the attack.

Some players find that alternate tunings open up so many possibilities, they want to use them all at once. But you leave a lot of space.
If you have too many ideas in a piece, it's very hard to edit. And, for me, it goes back to keeping things simple. As I get older, I find that I want to pare back the number of ideas in a song, and to keep them simple. Not simplistic—just direct—so the ideas are stated coherently and in a straightforward fashion. I feel like my intuition in that regard has gotten sharper over the years.

How did you develop your approach to using alternate tunings?
I started out in standard tuning, like most people. I started playing when I was about 14 or so. And at that time, there weren't very many instruction books for the kind of music I gravitated towards. I started out playing songs by Mississippi John Hurt and Reverend Gary Davis in standard tuning.

I was also discovering the music of John Fahey and Robbie Basho around the same time—but I didn't really understand anything about open tunings. When it came to starting to write material, I had a hard time working in standard tuning because I felt like it was not mine. And so for me, writing original material was also a process of trying to come up with my own tunings and finding a way of navigating through them.

I have nothing against standard tuning. It's so versatile—I mean, there's a reason why so many people employ it and why it works for so many different kinds of music. But I needed to get away from it. It wasn't necessarily even a process that I articulated in my own mind.

Did you did you start with more common open tunings and then start creating your own?
The first one I learned was open G. I think I got it from Elizabeth Cotten's first album (*Folksongs and Instrumentals with Guitar*, 1958). The liner notes had the tuning and that was the first time I actually tried playing something in an alternate tuning.

I got into making up my own open tunings when I was working with Cul de Sac, which started in the late 1980s. I was playing variations on open C and some others. But the band would get impatient with me with retuning on stage when we played out.

It very quickly became a writing tool. Using the partial capo together with open tunings, I needed to navigate my way through pretty much totally unfamiliar terrain. And that became my writing method. When I started, I don't believe that anyone was making a partial capo. The capo that I use most just covers the lower three strings. I had the idea to just take a regular capo and cut it in half with a hacksaw. It worked to some degree. But with most capos, if you cut off that much of it, it'll pop off the neck or bow up to the point that the low E string is buzzing and you can't get a clean note.

I probably went through 60 or 70 different brands before I found one that I can reliably use. It was one that I got from China. It works because it clamps down over the top of the strings rather than from behind the neck. They're cheap, terrible capos, but I order them in bulk and modify them, and I replace the cheap parts with good parts.

Are these all for your own use?
I've been taking commissions on them for about 25 years and have probably made 100 capos for people around the world. So, not exactly a cottage industry [*laughs*]. But some people find them useful.

Do you use custom string gauges or modify the guitar to accommodate the lower pitches?
Not really. I use regular D'Addario EJ17s. Most of the time, I can still accommodate a low [sixth] string down to A. Sometimes, I go up to B if it feels a little too floppy. But mostly I can get away with going all the way down to A.

With the strings that slack, isn't difficult to get a solid attack without buzzing?
No, not really. I like a fairly clean sound and a certain amount of resistance from the string. After at a certain point, you're not thinking so much about how the strings sound, but how they feel. And if they're too slack, I'll tune up a half step or a step. One change I did notice when I started playing a fan-fret guitar: You're tuning the string tighter because the lower strings are longer on a fan fret.

You compared your use of tunings to starting a painting with a canvas of a certain color. Can you elaborate?
The tuning suggests something about the mood and feel of the piece. The [underpainting] color of the canvas will often determine the next color you use. Instead of a white or blank canvas, you're starting with one that's green or orange or something like that. Now you can maybe tell that I was a painting and printmaking major in college in the '70s! [*laughs*]

How do the tunings influence the way you connect with the instrument as you play?
There are a number of things—the process of playing is not just an aural experience. It's very tactile, the way the guitar resonates against the body, the way the guitar feels in my hands. It's a holistic thing. I'm always looking for an emotional component. I mean, a lot of technical stuff is involved in getting to the point of being able to make something, but once I'm there, I don't want people to hear the tunings necessarily or partial capo position—all I want them to hear is the music. **AG**



Michael Hedges outside the
Daisy Theatre, Memphis, TN, 1996

WINDHAM HILL RECORDS/EBET ROBERTS

Discovering Michael Hedges

Four contemporary fingerstyle masters—Andy McKee, Kaki King, Christie Lenée, and Mike Dawes—reflect on the impact and legacy of a guitar revolutionary

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

Andy McKee was 18 when he first encountered Michael Hedges, thanks to a collection of hundreds of guitar magazines that an older cousin gave him. Intrigued by a cover photo of Hedges cradling a harp guitar, McKee, a budding electric player with a love of instrumental music, dug through the stacks of magazines to learn more and came across *Guitar Player*'s Soundpage recording of Hedges' "Because It's There." With its trance-like tapping, chiming harmonics, and deep bass lines, Hedges' harp guitar piece sounded more like a trio than a solo performance.

"I was like, this sounds amazing," recalls McKee. "So I went out and bought all the albums I could find. I got *Taproot* and *Live on the Double Planet,* and then *Aerial Boundaries* shortly after that—and that was what sealed my fate, I guess."

Built on radical alternate tunings, intricate two-handed tapping, and intense guitar-body percussion, Hedges' technique was astounding, but the impact of his music went much deeper, McKee says. "I mean, as a guitar player, I was fascinated of course with, 'What is he doing? How is this one guy?' But at the same time, I felt such a connection emotionally with his music. He had such a creative and brilliant mind for composition, and he knew how to speak with the guitar."

McKee never got the chance to hear his new guitar hero in person—just a few months later, in December 1997, Hedges died in a car crash at age 43. But discovering Hedges forever changed McKee's sense of the creative possibilities of guitar, and he went on to become a top acoustic fingerstylist, continuing on the path that Hedges blazed.

To mark the 25th anniversary of Hedges' passing, I asked McKee, as well as fellow instrumental guitar masters Kaki King, Christie Lenée, and Mike Dawes, to reflect on how Hedges impacted their lives and music. All have built their careers in the wake of Hedges; McKee and King are in their early 40s, and Lenée and Dawes are in their 30s. These four guitarists have their own distinctive styles but share the sense that Hedges helped make it possible for them and countless other players to do what they do.

"I do feel like I have my own voice, but the techniques and just the inspiration to play the acoustic guitar go straight to Michael Hedges," says McKee. "And I think anybody in my field that's being honest would say the same thing, if they're using weird tunings and unusual techniques on an acoustic guitar. I mean, he blew the doors open."

GROWING UP WITH WINDHAM HILL

Unlike McKee, Kaki King can't pinpoint a eureka moment of discovering Michael Hedges, because she hardly recalls a time when she did *not* know his music.

"I owe so much of my musical education to my father, and he played records all the time," she recalls. "The Windham Hill catalog was on heavy rotation—Hedges' *Aerial Boundaries* in particular, but also Will Ackerman, Michael Manring, Alex de Grassi, Andrew York, and all. And I actually did see Hedges play in Atlanta in a church. I believe I was four or five. My father, again, took me on his adventures. It was just the impressions of a very small child, but I remember Hedges' hair, I remember his guitar, and I remember him being alone and thinking, wow, how powerful that was."

All those early memories came back when King began exploring the guitar in a serious way as a young teen in the early '90s. "When it came time for me to discover those [artists] on my own, I knew where to start," she says. "I grabbed the CDs, and it was just a matter of listening and going, 'Oh, I can tune my guitar differently—cool. Oh, I can use all my fingers. I can tap…' I was really blessed that the music was so readily available." In addition, King recalls watching Hedges in the *Windham Hill Live at Wolf Trap* video from 1986 and picking up clues about his tunings and extended techniques.

King never specifically became a disciple of Hedges, as she absorbed a wide range of music. She describes the decade leading up to her 2003 debut album, *Everybody Loves You,* as "a very slow osmosis of figuring out who I was as a person and as a guitarist." Along the way, though, the music of Hedges and his Windham Hill compatriots remained a source of inspiration and emotional comfort.

"In terms of being a very awkward teenager that didn't have a lot of other outlets, it was a very safe place for me to go," she says. "It felt like these core memories of childhood happiness. And I loved being able to write and use that style to fill in where everyone would expect lyrics to go."



Andy McKee



Christie Lenée

COMPOSING LESSONS

Christie Lenée's first encounter with Hedges' music came in 2005, when she was studying jazz guitar and composition at the University of South Florida. She hadn't written much for solo guitar at the time—her main focus was on singer-songwriter material and music for larger ensembles—but she had a commission to write an instrumental piece. On deadline, she felt unsatisfied with her composition thus far and was on the hunt for fresh ideas.

"I ended up going to an open mic and met this guy named Sean Frenette, who is this absolute wizard of a musician and composer," she recalls. "He got up at the open mic with a three-string guitar, where three strings were removed, and he played this piece called 'Viennawaterfalls' that was all tapping. I'd never seen anything like it, and I just was completely glued to him."

The next day, Lenée met up with Frenette to learn more about tapping—and he told her about Hedges. "Of course I started with *Aerial Boundaries,* and I couldn't stop listening to it," she recalls. "It opened up this whole new world. I listened to it every night as I was falling asleep for probably at least a year, particularly 'Rickover's Dream.'"

In composition class, Lenée saw a connection between Hedges' guitar music and the multipart orchestrations she was studying. "If I was looking at, say, a six-piece ensemble, I had this vision that what Michael was doing was that each string of his guitar became one piece of the ensemble," she says. "And then he was using a lot of overtones and harmonics, and he'd play percussion at the same time, so it sounds like more than six parts."

One reason for the sophistication of Hedges' music, she adds, was his multifaceted background. Hedges played flute, piano, clarinet, and cello, and had a degree from Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory. At the same time he was studying modern experimental composition, electronic music, and classical guitar at Peabody, he was writing many of the pieces released on his 1981 debut, *Breakfast in the Field* (for a transcription of the title track, see page 56).

Since discovering Hedges and the world of tapping/percussive guitar, says Lenée, "I've heard a lot of people tackle that kind of style, but nobody's ever done it the way that he did it. And I think that it's because he was a very trained composer. He was not just a guitar player trying to do fancy stuff. He was using the guitar as a tool to write music, and that's something I have really taken to heart. I never wanted to just learn his techniques to become flashy or try to copy him."

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Over in England, Mike Dawes found his way to Hedges through his godfather, Allen Greenall, an old friend of French guitar master Pierre Bensusan and graphic designer for Bensusan's albums and books. As a Christmas present when he was 17, Dawes got the tab book for Bensusan's 2001 album, *Intuite,* which included a composition called "So Long Michael."

"It was my favorite track of the entire album—and obviously it had my name in it," Dawes says. "I thought, upon listening to it, 'This is a song I might be able to play if I really try.' It's a slower number with some beautiful melodies."

In the *Intuite* tab book, Dawes read that "So Long Michael" was dedicated to Michael Hedges. So Dawes did some research and quickly found *Aerial Boundaries*—on which, in a neat bit of symmetry, track two is titled "Bensusan."

"Through that, just getting into the *Aerial Boundaries* record in particular, I fell in love with this whole new way of playing guitar," he says. "Also, this freedom of composition and expression that's demonstrated in songs like 'Spare Change,' where it's just playing around with tape loops—that really opened my mind as a teenager and set me on the path of solo expression and self-discovery through the guitar and through music."

Dawes learned "So Long Michael" from the Bensusan book and started tackling "Aerial Boundaries." "I was playing it on my Epiphone Les Paul, which as you can imagine sounded awful," he recalls, "but I couldn't afford an acoustic guitar." An accident accelerated his learning: His mother dropped his Les Paul and the headstock broke; they reglued the headstock, and while it was drying, the guitar lay flat on the dining room table.

"I tuned the guitar to DADGAD and spent more time exploring the fretboard from that vertical position and looking at it like a piano, working out where the major and minor arpeggios were and all of this," he says. "So when I eventually bought my first acoustic guitar, I felt a little bit more proficient in DADGAD than I would have if I just went through learning pieces."

For Dawes, one of the appeals of Hedges' and Bensusan's guitar music was its completeness. "The reason my barometer shifted from electric to acoustic was I can express what I want to express by myself, literally in the moment—bass, harmony, and melody all together," he says. "When you're playing electric guitar, you have to be in a band to do that, and I just didn't have that infrastructure around me where I grew up. Also, I'm very extroverted in some ways as a person—I travel and I socialize—but I'm very introverted in things I create. I don't want anyone else to have any part. It's an incredibly personal journey."

UNCOVERING HEDGES

Several of these guitarists have undertaken the challenge of paying tribute to Hedges onstage and on record.

McKee covers "Because It's There"—his introduction to Hedges—on harp guitar, as well as some of Hedges' seminal works from *Aerial Boundaries*. "I've had the opportunity to meet his kids and his siblings, and that's been really great," McKee says. "They'll come to a show, and I'll play 'Aerial Boundaries' or 'Ragamuffin.' Very, very special moments for me."

Lately Dawes has been performing an instrumental take on "All Along the Watchtower," which he introduces as "my version of Michael Hedges' version of Jimi Hendrix's version of a Bob Dylan song," and he plans to include it on his next solo album. Dawes calls Hedges' rocking



Mike Dawes



Kaki King

interpretation, with vocals, "one of the best covers ever." With Hedges' tuning, lowest string to highest, D A E E A A, "You get those unisons, but because the string tensions are different, there is a bit of chorusing. It makes a single guy with an acoustic guitar just sound massive."

Kaki King had the distinction of playing an exceptionally high-profile cover of Hedges: In the 2007 movie *August Rush*, she provided the sound and on-camera hands for the actor Freddie Highmore, who starred as a child guitar prodigy, as he performs Hedges' intense, percussive "Ritual Dance" in a park.

David Crosby recommended King to the filmmakers. "I was really flattered," she recalls. "But then they were basically telling me to rewrite a song from this worshipped and deceased incredible guitar composer, to make it look better for Hollywood. I really struggled with this one, because I was like, 'This is just sacrilegious.'"

The approach that ultimately worked for King was to imagine Hedges performing "Ritual Dance" (played in the tuning D A D G C C). "I thought, if he was doing this live and riffing, what would he do?" says King. "So that is indeed what I tried to accomplish, and I literally prayed to his spirit: 'Michael, bud, I'm going to do it. I hope you forgive me.'"

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

Oftentimes, as these guitarists have explored Hedges' music, they've been inspired to create their own.

Lenée learned more about the inner workings of Hedges' music through John Stropes' transcription book *Rhythm, Sonority, Silence*. "I've found that when I've started to learn some tunings," she says, "I end up getting so inspired by the tunings and the concepts that I end up writing something—just looking at it from the bigger picture of, 'Oh, OK, I see where he's coming from.'"

One example is Lenée's "Breath of Spring," which she's recorded for the *Acoustic Guitar* Sessions video series. "It started with trying to be able to tap one melody on the left hand while playing a countermelody on the right hand," she says, "so there's definitely some influence of Michael in that."

Another idea Lenée gleaned from listening to Hedges is using a tuning with a note other than the root on the sixth string. In "Rickover's Dream," for instance, Hedges tunes to C G D G B C, and the song is in G—so the root bass note is on the fifth string, and the bass note of the IV chord is on the bottom. In her instrumental "Chasing Infinity," Lenée tunes to C G D G A D for a similar effect. "That sound with the low C on the bottom when the song is actually in G, it's just a really amazing way that a piece can open up," she says.

'I do feel like I have my own voice, but the techniques and just the inspiration to play the acoustic guitar go straight to Michael Hedges.'
–ANDY McKEE

Dawes wrote his piece "Encomium (Reverie)" as a direct response to Hedges' "Dirge," using the same tuning: B F♯ C♯ D A D (in concert, Dawes tunes a whole step higher). Having adjacent strings tuned a half step apart, like the C♯ and D, he says, "creates these really dark-sounding chords and also scale runs where you can let those notes ring into each other."

While many guitarists focus on Hedges' wizardly fingerstyle work, Dawes lately finds himself drawn more to what he calls the "whacka-whacka style"—the hard-rocking strum-based style Hedges used on songs like the above-mentioned "All Along the Watchtower" and "Ritual Dance," often with unison strings in the tuning. "The whacka-whacka kind of mega Joni Mitchell tunings in the context of an instrumental on a dreadnought is the biggest sound an acoustic guitar can make, and I just adore it so much," says Dawes. "So that's definitely an angle I'm leaning towards in my own compositions moving forward."

McKee actually wrote his song "For My Father" while learning "Aerial Boundaries." He was in the process of getting into the "Aerial Boundaries" tuning, C C D G A D, but had not yet tuned the sixth string down to C. The resulting tuning, E C D G A D, sparked not only "For My Father" but "Rylynn" and other originals.

Beyond Hedges' specific tunings, McKee says that Hedges—himself inspired by artists such as Joni Mitchell, David Crosby, and Stephen Stills—demonstrated how new tunings can stir compositional ideas. "If you have muscle memory that, here's the minor pentatonic scale, here's the major scale, here's C major, here's G7, you're throwing away all those mechanical things," McKee says. "You're forced to explore the fretboard all over again like you're a complete beginner. You don't know what's going to be on the seventh fret necessarily. You've got a whole new palette to paint with, and you have to try to discover what's possible."

THE PATH TO YOURSELF

Perhaps the deepest lesson—and challenge—from Hedges' musical path is to buck convention and find your own way. "You have to have people breaking down these boundaries so that other people can walk through them," says Dawes. "It just so happens that the boundary that he broke through was a really, really thick wall."

King notes the tremendous growth in the number and diversity of guitarists who've walked through that wall and explored all sorts of instrumental music in recent years. "When I started, there was a generation gap, where even the older players were playing to small audiences," she says. "There was no zeitgeist, no scene, no young excitement, and out of pure chance this became a career for me. But now instrumental music has come back



KIM STRINGFELLOW



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MISCHA HEDGES

DOCUMENTING HEDGES

Fans of Michael Hedges can look forward to two major projects in the pipeline: a feature documentary and a full-length biography.

The documentary, *Oracle: The Life and Music of Michael Hedges,* is a family affair—directed and produced by Michael's son Mischa Hedges and brother Brendon Hedges. With a projected release in 2024, *Oracle* will include archival concert footage, home movies, and extensive interviews with Hedges' friends and collaborators. Recent filming captured reminiscences from David Crosby and a performance of "Because It's There" by the 30-member U.S. Guitar Orchestra.

The biography, by guitarist Jake White, should also be published within the next year or two. In the meantime, the revamped michaelhedges.com offers a number of resources for exploring Hedges' music, including biographical notes, a video library, and even a complete rundown of his stage rig, PA requirements, and string gauges. Also noteworthy is the tuning database now on stropes.com, courtesy of Hedges' transcriber John Stropes, on which you can find the definitive tunings (and even hear the open string pitches) for many compositions by Hedges as well as Alex de Grassi, Leo Kottke, Andy McKee, and more. ***—JPR***

in so many different ways. It is so cool to have people I'm really good friends with that are younger, that are women, that are women of color."

The guitar world can have "a very sick sense of competition," King adds. "But the truth of it is, the more of us out there, the more that people know this genre and appreciate it and support it, it's a rising tide—it floats all boats. So I am thrilled beyond belief."

Hedges himself, I imagine, would embrace the diversity of sounds and styles in today's guitar scene—and the way the four guitarists I interviewed are moving in their own directions. That's evident in their current projects: Dawes has an EP of duets with Tommy Emmanuel coming soon, along with a new solo album; McKee's next release is ambient instrumental music with all synthesizer—no guitar—to be followed by a guitar trio project with Calum Graham and Trevor Gordon Hall; Lenée is finishing up an album of vocal-oriented acoustic pop-folk with lots of 12-string guitar; and King is scheming to make a collaborative ensemble album.

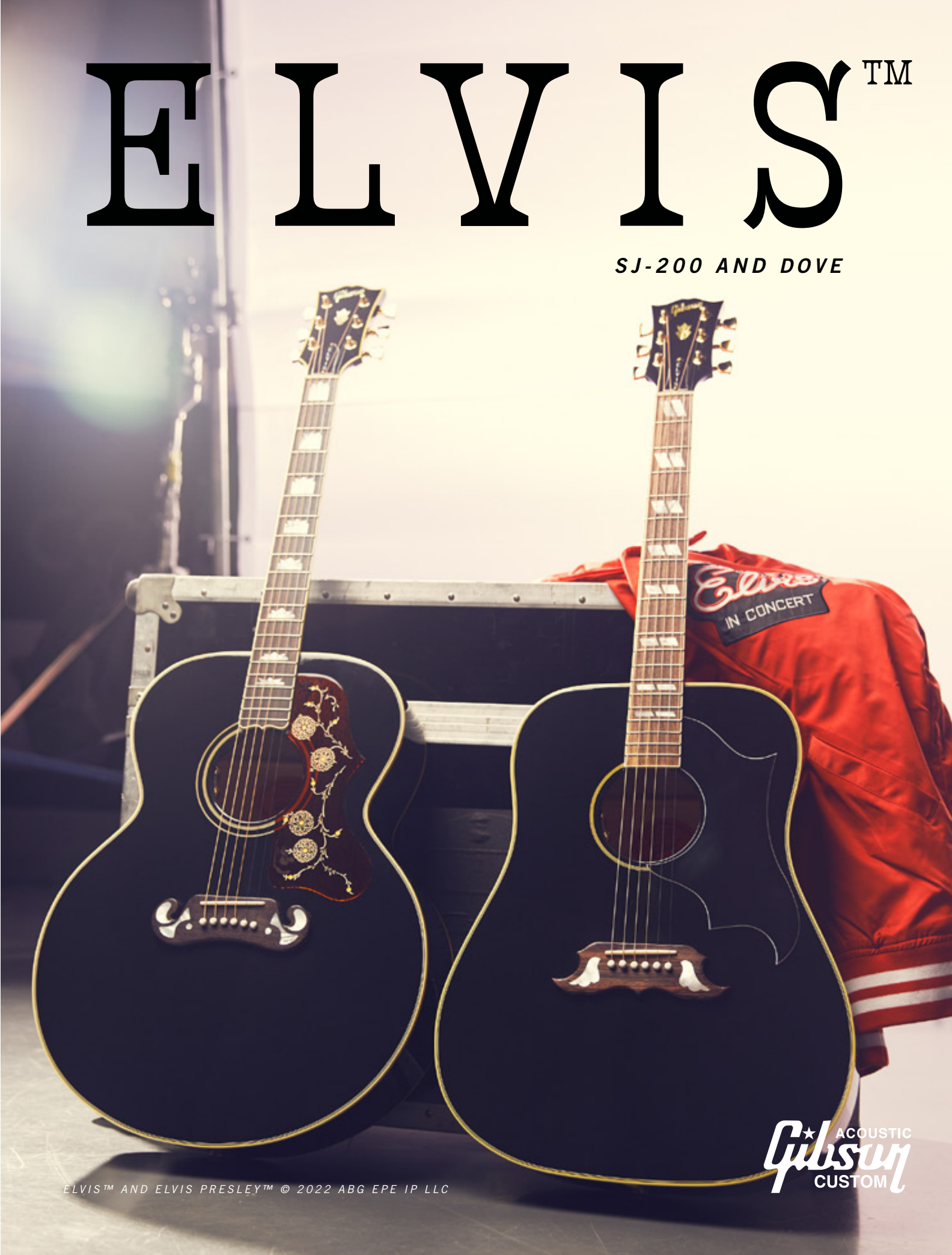
'I would rather people choose not to imitate me, but to follow what they want.'
– MICHAEL HEDGES

"I would rather people choose not to imitate me, but to follow what they want," Hedges told me back in 1990, when I interviewed him at his home studio for the fifth issue of *Acoustic Guitar*. "I get demo tapes from people who are trying to play like me, but they don't really work. Nothing works if you try to be like something else. Music is something that you have to say yourself. I don't want to go to a musical performance where someone says, 'OK, I'm going to play like Jimi Hendrix,' just like I don't go see Elvis impersonators. I don't see any point in that. But when I hear somebody trying to be themselves, it may not be all that great; but if it's true, that's what touches me.

"I'm not saying that people should *not* learn other people's material. I play other people's material. I mean, I once made my living playing Neil Young songs just as Neil Young played them. That's what I wanted to do at that point, but it was in a process of developing my own thing. I just think that it's important to be yourself. The path to yourself may be through others." **AG**

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Berta Rojas



RODRIGO DA SILVA

In Their Footsteps

Berta Rojas celebrates the lives and music of classical guitar pioneers Ida Presti and María Luisa Anido

BY MARK SMALL

On April 1, 2022, the day before her concert for the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, three-time Latin Grammy nominee Berta Rojas experienced what every musician dreads. While she and her hosts had lunch at a restaurant, a thief smashed the window of their car and stole her guitar. The consummate professional, she played a brilliant concert nonetheless the following evening on a borrowed instrument. But Rojas returned to her home in Boston suspecting she might never again see the guitar on which she had practiced countless hours and played more than 200 concerts worldwide over 14 years.

The night before she flew to Cleveland, Rojas recorded the final track for her latest album, *Legado*. Weary after teaching all day at Berklee College of Music, where she is an associate professor, she felt prompted to record the last piece for the album she was tracking in her Boston apartment. "I wondered if I should do it that night or after I returned from Cleveland," she says. "Then I remembered the words my mother used to say: 'Never leave for tomorrow what you can do today.' So I recorded it that night. I am glad I did because there is a uniform sound on the album from using the same guitar on every piece."

Meanwhile, in Cleveland, police detectives, local press, and the guitar community spread the news of the theft and followed leads for the instrument's recovery. The guitar society offered a reward. Cleveland media publicizing the tale about about the storied guitar built by Irish luthier Michael O'Leary made it unlikely the thief would net anything close to its $20,000 value. In late May, on the eve of her album's release, Rojas was reunited with the guitar after a two-month absence. Overjoyed, Rojas says, "I thought *Legado* might be my last recording with this guitar. I got lucky." She can now resume building her own legacy in collaboration with the instrument she calls "La Rojita."

HONORING PIONEERS

Legado (meaning "legacy" in Spanish) features 12 tracks composed by or written in homage to a pair of classical guitar pioneers: Ida Presti (1924–1967) of France and María Luisa Anido (1907–1996) of Argentina. Rojas' interest in the music of these figures was sparked by author and lecturer Candice Mowbray, who chronicles the lives and achievements of historic female guitarists. "Candice visited with me about 15 years ago when she was writing her doctoral thesis about Ida Presti's compositions for solo guitar," Rojas says. "I didn't know about Ida before that. Other colleagues I knew—Cinzia Milani, Heike Matthiesen, and Emma Rush—began playing her music." A guitar prodigy, Presti garnered international acclaim during her lifetime for her exceptional technique, expressive abilities, and aptitude for arranging and composing.

Rojas also became intrigued with María Luisa Anido: "She had an interesting life story that I wanted to tell through her music." Rojas realized that the experiences of these women were not unlike those of Francesca Caccini (1587– ca. 1645), Emilia Giuliani (1813–1850), Vahdah Olcott-Bickford (1885–1980), and others who contributed



Alexandre Lagoya and Ida Presti



María Luisa Anido

ALEXANDRE LAGOYA/ WIKIMEDIA (LEFT); ANGELARESAL4/ WIKIMEDIA

to the history of classical guitar but receive scant notice today.

The album opens with Presti's "Segovia." Composed in 1962 and dedicated to its namesake, this is Presti's longest and most sophisticated solo guitar work. Rojas thoughtfully navigates the piece's floating melodies above rippling arpeggios and counterpoint, and swells of harmony and texture.

In "Idylle pour Ida (Hommage à Ida Presti)," John Duarte ponders the premature passing of his friend with a probing and insistent minor-key melody that flows to sunnier major-key segments and passages of swept arpeggios before concluding on an enigmatic minor-major seventh chord. Gilbert Biberian eulogizes his former teacher in "Prelude No. 1: Tombeau." Its spirited theme ascends from the bass register and unfolds atop prismatic arpeggio figures and chordal and bass note jabs. Rojas maintains momentum throughout the two-minute elegy with her characteristic polished tone.

Presti wrote the waltz "Danse Rythmique" for her husband, Alexandre Lagoya, with whom she formed the preeminent guitar duo of their era. The pair performed from 1952–1967, giving an estimated 2,000 concerts until Presti's untimely passing weeks before her 43rd birthday. Rojas's buoyant rendition of "Danse" highlights Presti's rhythmic sensibility, gift for melody, and gentle yet colorful chromaticism. It is her most-recorded work.

Just as Rojas has become the prime proponent of the music of Agustín Barrios (who hailed from her country, Paraguay), María Luisa Anido became a standard bearer for the music of her nation, Argentina. Anido's musical abilities were nurtured by her father, Juan Carlos Anido, an indefatigable promoter of classical guitar in Argentina. Anido's prodigious talents were noted by touring Spanish guitar legends who were frequent guests in her home, among them Miguel Llobet, with whom Anido studied and performed. Being an international performer, however, was not deemed an appropriate vocation for a woman in that time and place. It wasn't until 1950 that Anido made her first international tour playing prestigious venues in South and Central America, Europe, Russia, Japan, and the Philippines.

'They paved the way for me to travel the world with a guitar. Now, that's seen as normal a profession for women as it is for men.'

–BERTA ROJAS

"After Anido's parents had passed away, she became able to travel the world," Rojas says. "You see pictures of her with gray hair playing in Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow. She got started later in her life." Anido made up for lost time and pursued a robust career performing, teaching, composing, and arranging for the guitar until her death in Tarragona, Spain, at age 89. She credited her father for "making a guitarist out of me . . . I became a relentless traveler, with my guitar on my back," she stated, "like the countrymen of my remote childhood. My guitar was my passport."

FOLK ROOTS

Argentinian folk music elements are prominent components in Anido's compositions, as reflected in selections Rojas chose to record. The dolorous "Aire de Vidalita" takes its inspiration from the *vidalita* folk song form of the grassy lowlands of the Pampas. "Triste No. 1," from a set of nine works titled *Impresiones Argentinas*, has a solemn yet noble-sounding first theme that leads to a heartening middle section before a recap of the first theme. The evocative "El Misachico," the final piece in Anido's *Impresiones Argentinas,* honors the memory of Anido's mother. It features an elegiac melody and somber tambura taps on low the strings. These sounds imitate the violin, bass, and drum typically heard in a *misachico* procession, part of a ceremony imploring


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heaven for rain for crops in the arid Catamarca province of northwest Argentina. Rojas renders Anido's music with finesse, insight, and heartfelt sincerity.

Rojas commissioned Sérgio Assad's four-movement *Anido's Portrait*, the concluding work on *Legado*. Assad had gotten to meet Anido once in Paris after a concert by the Assad Brothers duo. "When I mentioned the concept of the album and commissioning this piece, he was immediately onboard," Rojas says. She thought it important to choose Assad, one of the foremost composers of contemporary guitar music, to write an homage to Anido. "This will put her name out there and people will want to know who she was," Rojas notes.

Assad asked Rojas and Mowbray to provide information about Anido's trajectory and touring. "Candice sent him a timeline of María Luisa's travels," Rojas recalls, "and he started thinking about the rhythms identified with those places. The first movement, 'Chacarera,' relates to her childhood in Argentina. 'Zapateado' is a Spanish dance and includes a reharmonization of her piece 'Canción del Yucatán.' The third movement, 'Barynya,' has a Russian theme and rhythm representing her visits to Russia. The final movement, 'Salsa,' relates to the later years of her life spent in Cuba."

Assad created his themes by assigning a note to each letter of the name María Luisa Anido and developing these motives throughout the work. "It's a beautiful way to honor her memory and legacy," adds Rojas.

FOLLOWING HER PASSION

Rojas is among the most prominent classical guitarists of our day and is named after her paternal great-grandmother, whose parents lived near the Swiss-German border before emigrating to Colonia Suiza, Uruguay. "She was named Berta and also played the guitar," Rojas says. "She had 14 children, and each of them had four or five children. From our very large family, I am the only one named Berta and I play the guitar. I never got to meet her, but she lives on in me."

As a child, Rojas played both piano and guitar, but focused exclusively on guitar by the age of 10 with teachers Felipe Sosa (an early champion of the music of Agustín Barrios) and Violeta de Mestral. When it came time for college, her mother encouraged her to study economics. After her first year, she attended a music seminar in Brazil and was inspired by the young and dedicated musicians she met. "When I saw their passion and commitment, I thought I'd do it too," she says. "There was no possibility to study music at the university level back then in Paraguay, so I went to Uruguay and began a chapter in my life of constant study and practicing."

Rojas had saved for a year to study in Uruguay with Abel Carlevaro, "But my money ran out very quickly," Rojas remembers. "Carlevaro wrote a letter to my mother saying I was really talented and that she should support me. After that, she decided to help me." Rojas subsequently enrolled at the music school of the Universidad Nacional de Uruguay and studied with Eduardo Fernández and Mario Payseé. She later received funding from a Kennedy Center program for young Latin American artists that brought her to Baltimore's Peabody Institute for tutoring with Manuel Barrueco, Ray Chester, and Julian Gray. She earned her master's degree and graduate diploma in performance there before launching her recording and performing career, which encompasses three albums of Barrios' music, and more recent forays into different styles including *Salsa Rojas* (2013), *Historia del Tango* (2015), and her Brazilian-flavored *Felicidade* (2017).

Legado is the 14th album in her discography, and throughout, her playing is refined and sublime. Rojas gives every note its due as she homes in on the essence of each work. The recorded sound of her guitar is rich and detailed thanks to the efforts of recording engineer Randy Roos and editor Sebastián Henríquez.

Rojas is a musical celebrity in Paraguay and bears the honorary title Illustrious Ambassador of Musical Art. With this project, she shines a light on women musicians, but she advocates opening doors across the board for all women. In a phone call from Asunción, where she spent last summer, she mentioned that Paraguayan women only gained the right to vote in 1961. "Down here, I am talking about equal opportunities for women using the examples of Presti and Anido," she says. "They traveled the world and wrote music in a time when that wasn't the role of women. They paved the way for me to travel the world with a guitar. Now, that's seen as normal a profession for women as it is for men." AG



GUILLERMO FRIDMAN

WHAT SHE PLAYS

Berta Rojas' guitar, which she has dubbed "La Rojita" (a nod to both her surname and the red color of the instrument's case), was built by the Irish luthier Michael O'Leary in 2008. The instrument has a cedar top with lattice bracing, and Madagascar rosewood back and sides. Rojas strings her O'Leary with normal tension Savarez carbon trebles and Savarez hard tension polished basses. —*MS*


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Young at Art

Five luthiers 30 and under share their stories and talk shop

By Kate Koenig







Brian Itzkin, Long Island, New York

For many luthiers, the path into the field is not a straightforward one. It can be a very personal journey, in which an aspiring builder discovers—often through exposure to both music and woodworking—a passion for working with their hands to create a product with both practical and artistic applications.

In recent years, a wide variety of young luthiers have joined the industry and are making names for themselves. We spoke to five promising builders—Brian Itzkin, Oliver Marchant, Eve Meister, Max Spohn, and Olivia Elia—most in their 20s. Here, these artisans share how they became intrigued by lutherie, where they studied it, what materials they prefer to work with, and their personal visions and approaches. Read on to gain insight into what goes into becoming and succeeding as a luthier.

BRIAN ITZKIN

CLASSICAL JOURNEY

Brian Itzkin, founder of Itzkin Guitars, started his lutherie journey when he was barely a teenager in Long Island, New York. He began studying the guitar at the age of eight, and, inspired by his father's woodshop, made his first acoustic out of a C.F. Martin & Co. kit at just 13 years old. "It turned out OK," he says, "I just kept building and getting better."

About a year later, Itzkin began corresponding with the Northern California luthier Ervin Somogyi, and later, after attending two years of college—where he briefly pursued an English degree—he studied with another builder, Stephen Hill, in Granada, Spain, which deepened his love of the classical guitar.

When Itzkin returned home to New York to build a guitar business, he started working part-time as a bartender to make ends meet. But when pouring drinks started becoming more of a full-time commitment, he decided to drop everything and return to Spain. Itzkin arrived on March 2, 2020, right before Spain's total Covid lockdown, and ended up staying until September of that year. "In that timeframe, I built a few guitars, one of which I sold through Siccas Guitars, which is a pretty big dealer in Germany," he says. "I gained a lot of legitimacy,

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRIAN ITZKIN







Oliver Marchant, Surrey, England

PHOTOS COURTESY OF OLIVER MARCHANT

quite a few orders, and haven't really looked back since then. For the past two years or so, I've been building guitars full-time."

As a classical maker, Itzkin, who is 26, has been heavily influenced by the pioneering Spanish maker Antonio de Torres (1817–1892) and also informed by the lesser-known Vicente Arias (1883–1914). "I generally gravitate towards a more 19th-century aesthetic, while melding it with a more contemporary tonal palette," Itzkin says. "I want my guitars to have a cohesive image where all the individual elements melt into the whole but can be admired from up close. I think they sound pretty good, too. "

Though he is firmly rooted in traditional aspects like fan bracing—"things that have worked for 150 years," he says—Itzkin does sometimes make use of more recent innovations. For instance, he explains, "I've been planning out a double-top guitar, with Italian Alpine spruce, an inner layer of Nomex, which is aerospace-grade composite honeycomb material, and another piece of spruce on top."

Itzkin also has a more contemporary take when it comes to tonewood selection. He always uses ethically sourced woods, often working with recycled materials, such as old furniture he's found in the street. "There are a lot of blood diamond-esque things in the guitar-making world with the timber we use," he says. "I don't really want to be a part of that. Alternative options also tend to be quite a bit cheaper, which I can pass down to the client."

One of Itzkin's favorite parts of the guitar-making process is choosing the materials that correspond with a client's vision, both sonically and aesthetically—that and being in the room when they play the first notes on their new guitar. He's confident and passionate about each instrument he delivers, but he also knows that there's always room for improvement. "I think the goalpost is always moving," he says. "If I finally found one thing that was perfect and kept making it, it would get boring pretty quickly."

OLIVER MARCHANT

A TRIUMPH OVER ADVERSITY

Based in Farnham, a town in Surrey, England,







Eve Meister, Montreal, Canada

30-year-old Oliver Marchant of Marchwood Guitars discovered lutherie as a much-needed creative outlet during a difficult time in his youth. In between pursuits of degrees in art and design and photography, he was diagnosed with a chronic illness.

"It's a long, boring story," Marchant shares, "but a few years into it, I was just feeling rudderless and kind of cut down in what should have been the prime of my life. I decided I wanted to find a project and complete it, to help me move on in some way."

After discovering a blog written by someone who had built a guitar at their kitchen table, Marchant set out to do the same on a desk in his bedroom, which initially proved difficult. "I got completely obsessed with triumphing and finishing it," he says. "And once you build the first one, it's pretty difficult not to build the second one, because there are so many different processes to master that you just think, 'The next one, I'm going to get it right.' I still feel like that, seven or eight years on."

Marchant currently offers an OM model, with dreadnought and 00 designs in development for future builds. He typically likes using walnut for backs and sides and German spruce for tops, and lately has been branching out with unconventional tonewoods, to adjust for increasing costs of materials and decreasing resources. He has been using Fenland oak—naturally blackened by being submerged in a UK bog for thousands of years—for fretboards and bridges. Last year, he built a guitar out of steamed pearwood from a vineyard in France, although he found it difficult to sell, as his clientele tends to have more conservative preferences. "I guess the thing now that has to change is peoples' buying habits as much as the building," he says.

Marchant emphasizes the benefits of having your guitar handmade by an independent luthier, saying that it's his hope for that awareness to spread. And, expressing gratitude for the amount of support he's received from the lutherie community, he says it's a personal goal of his to eventually teach others. "I've seen how beneficial craft can be

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MARTIN TREMBLAY, VINCENT CLÉROUX, ADAM WHALEY







Max Spohn, Heidenheim, Germany

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAX SPOHN

for you mentally and physically, and how it helps you to feel better about yourself and life," he says.

EVE MEISTER

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

Eve Meister, proprietor of Eve Meister Luthière, in Montreal, took up the guitar briefly in high school, but felt a much stronger connection with woodworking than she did a passion for playing. "I prefer building stuff in the concrete," she says. "When I was a teenager, I remember looking inside of my guitar and wondering how it works more than actually playing it."

With the desire to leave the small town she grew up in just outside of Montreal, Meister, now 28, studied at a well-established lutherie program in the city, École-Atelier Bruand, from 2011 to 2014. Afterwards, she apprenticed under the luthier Martin Tremblay, also in Montreal, from whom she learned how to restore gypsy jazz and acoustic archtop guitars. She started her own business while working for him, then began doing lutherie full-time in 2018.

Meister considers repair work to be the bread and butter of her business, and she does everything from neck resets to refrets to crack and impact repair. She advises any aspiring luthier to do the same, as it can be instructional for guitar making. "Repair work has helped me so much in understanding the geometry of instruments and how they move [when vibrating]," she says. "It has helped me identify common design flaws as well."

When it comes to building, Meister prefers either mahogany or walnut for backs, sides, and necks, and spruce for tops. She makes one model of her own design, affectionately dubbed "Booboo"—a lighthearted nickname for an early model that stuck—which, with a lower bout of 15 inches and an upper bout of roughly 11.5 inches, is a variation on a 00. "I'm trying to make the best object I can by doing a bit of parametrical design and not just doing a copy, she says. "I try to push the boundaries a bit. And, of course, I want to give the chance to musicians to have good-quality, locally made products for a respectable cost."







Olivia Elia, Sisters, Oregon

MAX SPOHN

AT ONCE MODERN AND VINTAGE

For 27-year-old Max Spohn of Spohn Guitars, a path to lutherie fit naturally with his interests. Spohn was always drawn to designing and building things. He started playing guitar at eight, and has a special memory of his father, who was an art teacher, letting him play his handmade acoustic. But it wasn't until his late teens that Spohn realized his calling as a luthier.

During a gap year between high school and university, Spohn was planning on studying industrial design, but became bored with preparing the drawings necessary for the application. Instead, he started modifying his electric guitars. "It was my mom's idea that I should think about becoming a luthier," he says. So Spohn started an internship with German guitar maker Thomas Ochs. After five months working under Ochs, he began studying lutherie at Westsächsische Hochschule Markneukirchen, a university for applied science in Saxony, Germany.

Despite his early work on electric guitars, Spohn knew that he would focus on steel-string acoustics and learn to make them as best as he could. He also knew that if he was going to pursue lutherie, he must be self-employed. "I always wanted to work creatively, and you can't necessarily do that if you're working for someone else as a guitar maker. So, I started my own business during the time that I studied."

Spohn currently offers four models: 00, OM, dreadnought, and baritone dreadnought. His instruments stand out in part because of the style of his inlays, which are uniquely minimalist and geometric. "I think that you can see that my guitars are different from most others," he says.

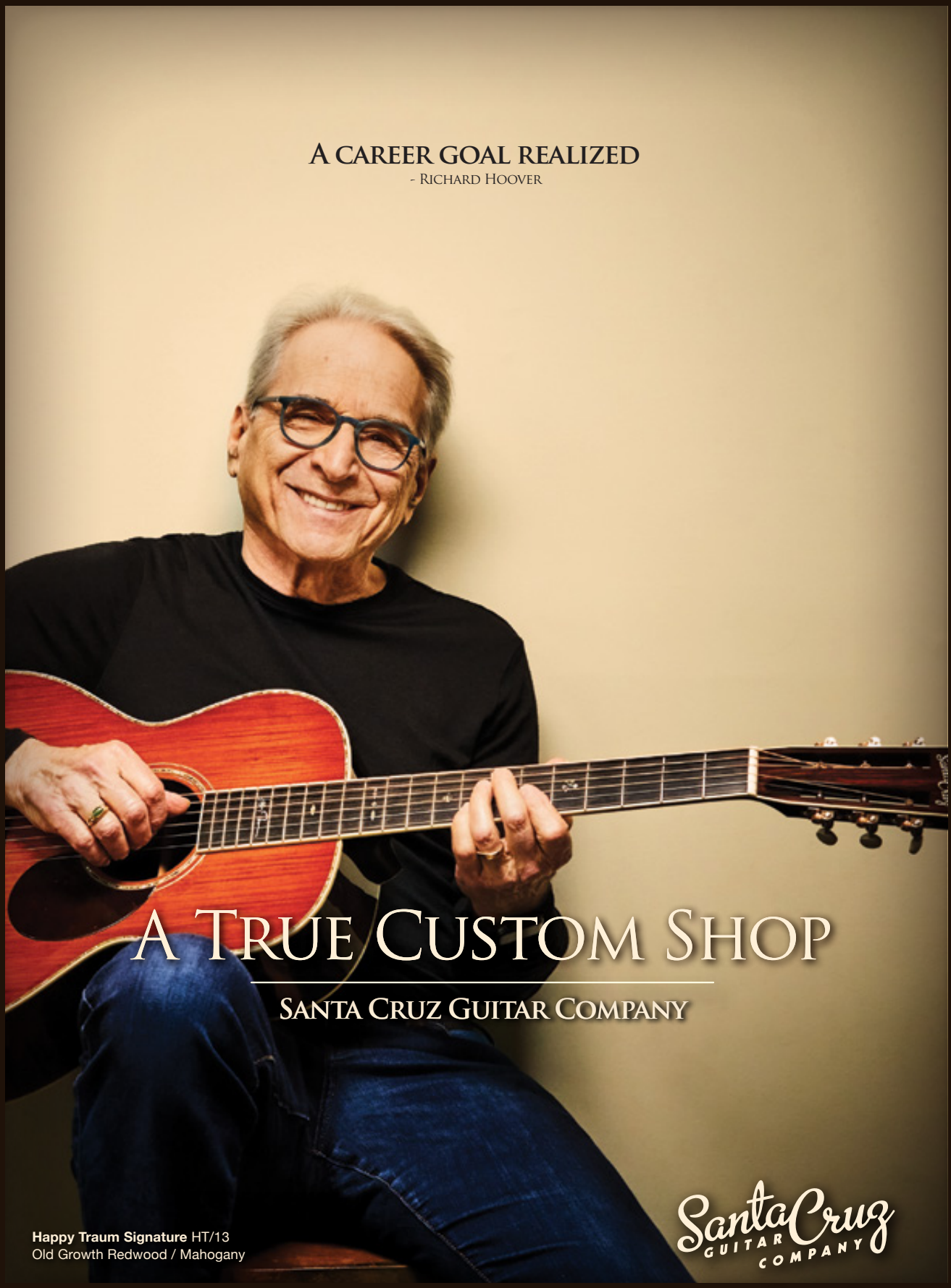
Spohn believes what makes a good luthier is consistency of quality, and that is his main goal. His building is guided by a vision of combining modern voicing with the feel of vintage instruments. "Many modern guitars are built very heavy, very rigid—at least the sides and the necks—and then have pretty flexible tops and backs. I try to build very lightweight guitars; I don't want the guitar to be so stiff that I can only feel the top and the back.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF OLIVIA ELIA

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A SOUND EDUCATION

A relatively short time ago, back in the 1960s and '70s, there were scant resources for aspiring luthiers in the steel-string world. Most builders were self-taught, learning from publications like *The Whole Earth Catalog* and Irving Sloane's *Classic Guitar Construction,* and through much trial and error. Of course, things are very different these days, with so many great teaching resources available both online and in person, including a number of schools in the United States, a handful of which are listed below. If you are interested in pursuing a path in guitar making, you might reach out to one of these institutions, where many luthiers of note cut their teeth.

American School of Lutherie
Portland, Oregon
americanschooloflutherie.com
info@americanschooloflutherie.com

Galloup School of Guitar Building and Repair
Big Rapids, Michigan
galloupguitars.com
bryan@galloupguitars.com

Colorado School of Lutherie
Denver, Colorado
coloradoschooloflutherie.com
info@coloradoschooloflutherie.com

Musicians Institute Guitar Craft Academy
Nashville, Tennessee
nashville.mi.edu
admissions@mi.edu

Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery
Phoenix, Arizona
roberto-venn.com
info@roberto-venn.com

Whetstone School of Lutherie
Brattleboro, Vermont
whetstoneschooloflutherie.com
scott@whetstoneschool.com

"What I like most about the guitar-making process," he adds, "is that I have so many different tasks to do. It rarely happens that I have to work on the same process on two consecutive days. Usually, I have something different to make each day."

OLIVIA ELIA

FROM FLY FISHING TO GUITAR MAKING

Though Olivia Elia is only 26, a life in lutherie has already been a long and winding road for the California native. "It's been like a thousand-piece puzzle that magically came together," she says, laughing.

Elia studied fine arts at UCLA, where she specialized in mediums like ceramics and film photography. After college, she taught fly fishing near Mount Shasta, California, at the same time beginning an apprenticeship for making bamboo fly-fishing rods—her first woodworking experience. "Building fly-fishing rods is very similar for me to building guitars," she continues, "because in both worlds you're working to the thousands of an inch and doing very small, focused detail work."

After that gig, Elia moved home, to Santa Rosa, California. Eager to build up her skills in woodworking, she accepted a job with ukulele manufacturer Kala Brand Music, where she learned everything about building instruments. She was allowed to use the shop in her spare time, and in 2019 made her first guitar, guided solely by William R. Cumpiano's *Guitar Making—Tradition and Technology*. "I didn't know what I was doing," she admits. "It was mostly just to attempt a project I had never done before. I think most of what I do in life is because I wanted to learn how to do it. You're going to learn so much more by doing something than you would by trying to learn about it before doing it."

Elia now works for one of the premier boutique makers, Preston Thompson Guitars, in Sisters, Oregon. Her main job is constructing bodies, most often using the holy grail combination of Brazilian rosewood and Adirondack spruce. "That's my favorite part of the process because you're going from nothing to something by the end of the day. You have this physical object that you can tap and hear it start to come to life."

Elia says that her versatile background in the arts, as well as in building fly-fishing rods, informs her guitar making as much as the standard practices of lutherie. "The instruments that I've designed and made are more aesthetically towards being works of art just as much as by how they sound," she explains. "I like pulling in colors from different places and working with all the lines, which I'm sure everyone considers, but I might just have a different eye for it." AG

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STRINGS BY MAIL

Judy Minot leads a body awareness seminar at Ashokan guitar camp.



OVI HORTA

HERE'S HOW

Body Awareness

A lesson for acoustic guitarists from the martial arts

BY JUDY MINOT

Most of us don't think much about our bodies when we're playing until we experience discomfort or pain. When that happens, we tend to focus just on the part that hurts. Learning better overall body awareness can help ward off unnecessary tension and pain before they become problematic. It can also help you play more comfortably, more musically, and with more energy and focus. It can even help you play faster.

As a guitarist, I make use of many ideas I learned in martial arts training (I practiced and taught Kokikai Aikido for 22 years.) Whether I'm tossing a 190-pound attacker to the ground or standing in front of a mic and an audience, I've learned to stay physically relaxed, balanced, and centered. You can start to integrate body awareness in all of your playing. You'll see the most improvement if you approach it consistently and with a bit of a plan. So, here's the plan.

1 FIND YOUR BEST POSTURE

Before you start a playing or practice session, take a moment to assess your posture. Sit or stand with your guitar. Take a deep breath and lift your chest to take some of the C-curve from your upper back. Position your head over your shoulders and deliberately relax your upper arms, shoulders, neck, and lower back.

Next, visualize a spot in the middle of your body just below your navel. Make that your center of balance. Let go of any tightness in your hands, thighs, knees, and face. Close your eyes, take some more deep breaths, and as you do, really try to experience this feeling with your whole body.

Start every playing session with finding this best posture. As you get deep into practicing and playing, you'll catch yourself slipping back into old habits of posture and tension. That's to be expected. The fact that you noticed is actually a win!

At first you'll need to stop playing to reset your posture and find a relaxed state. Over time it gets easier to check in as you play. Make a habit of being more aware of the sensations in your body while playing. What happens physically when you make a mistake or try something tricky? Does it make a difference when you open your chest, find your center, and relax more?

Because many of us have a habit of slouching, it can be tiring to sit upright at first. Our muscles just aren't used to it. That's OK. You don't have to aim for perfect posture at all times. Just try to do a bit better than you did yesterday.

Note: If you sit to practice and you don't play with a strap, seriously consider using a footrest. It will help you position the guitar so you don't need to hunch, slouch, raise one heel, or cross your legs. This can quickly make a difference in your playing comfort.

2 DON'T TRY HARDER, TRY SOFTER

As a small person practicing a martial art, I seldom out-mass any of my opponents. Relying on my muscle power is not a winning strategy to defeat an attacker. What does work though is trying softer instead of trying harder—using the minimum effort to get the maximum effect.

This isn't easy. Our brains are wired to think that trying means using more muscle. When we're playing and focusing intently, we naturally constrict muscles that really aren't needed. We unnecessarily tighten our fingers, hands, arms, and shoulders, and even hold our breath. We need to actively rewire the conditioning that makes us associate effort with muscle tension.

If you feel you've been hammering away at a chord progression, riff, or fingering pattern and you're not getting anywhere, pause, sit up, reset your posture, relax, and let your center of balance sink into your hips. Breathe deeply and let your mind be at ease.

Now try softer, using only as much effort as you need. Release every muscle that isn't necessary to hold the guitar or pick, move the fingers, and bring the strings to the frets. Is it easier? Do you hear a difference?

Actively relaxing your face can help release tension elsewhere in the body.

3 RELAX YOUR FACE

In the martial arts, even the slightest facial tension can be deadly, alerting an attacker to when you're about to move. Relaxing your face has practical application for musicians, too. A facial twitch or a frown is a sign of mental or physical tension—usually both.

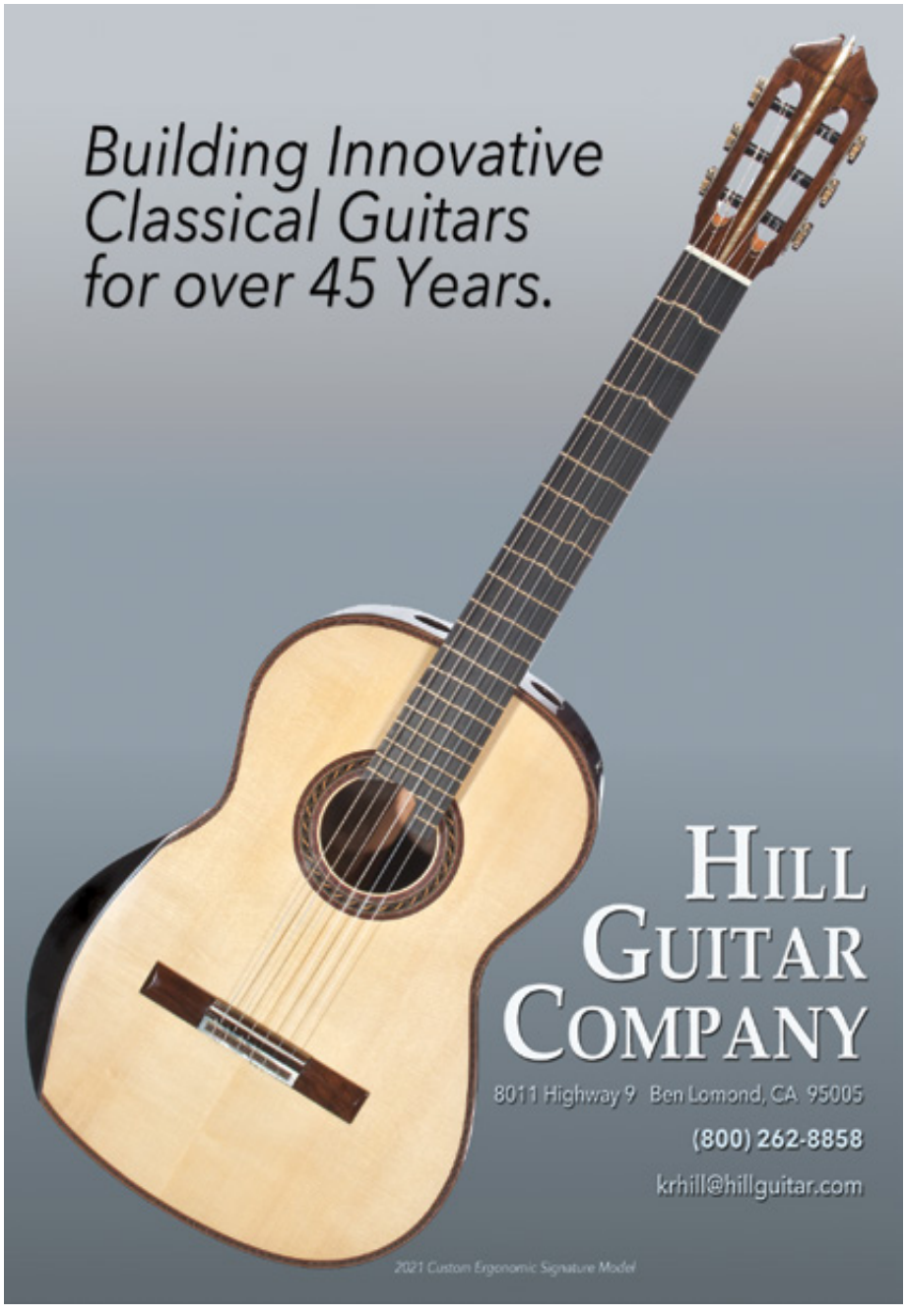
Actively relaxing your face can help release tension elsewhere in the body. Since the body and mind are connected, doing this also subtly calms your mind. When you see your guitar heroes rip out amazing riffs wearing a beatific smile, it's because they know this trick.

Learning to play with a relaxed face is easier than you might think. Start by playing something you know pretty well. As you play, be aware of how your jaw feels. When you let go of the tension in your face, does anything change in your playing? Is it easier to get the sounds you want? Use a mirror if it helps.

You may not hear or feel an immediate change. It may take a week or two, or even three, but gradually you'll find your face is calm for more and more of your playing time. You'll also become aware of those little winces as they happen. In smoothing them out, you'll be doing the same with your playing.

Research says that changing a habit can take two or three months. Building better body awareness is no exception. You'll need to offer persistent attention, humility, and even a bit of humor. The rewards—playing with greater ease, comfort, and energy—will make the effort worthwhile.

Judy Minot is the author of Best Practice: Inspiration and Ideas for Traditional Musicians. *judyminot.com/bestpractice*





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Brush Strokes

Adding variety to basic strumming patterns and using them in context

BY CATHY FINK

THE PROBLEM:

You know a few basic strumming patterns and would like to learn more.

THE SOLUTION:

Work on a handful of new patterns, both in 4/4 and 3/4, first practicing them on their own and then using them in traditional songs.

1 TRY SOME NEW 4/4 VARIATIONS

In the previous lesson, I showed you how to strum with a pick. This time I'll build on that by introducing some new patterns and teaching you how to use them when playing songs. It's easiest to begin strumming by including all the notes in a given chord, but that can quickly become monotonous. Let's try adding some variety to some strums on a C chord. Remember that I prefer a voicing with the fifth, G, played on the sixth string. However, you can use just a regular three-finger C chord, without a note on that lowest string.

Example 1a shows a strumming pattern that includes light brushes on just the bass strings on beats 1 and 3. Though three strings are consistently shown in the notation, it doesn't really matter how many you play; just aim for the lower strings with that brushing movement. You can mix and match this sort of idea with variations like the one depicted in **Example 1b**. Both patterns have quite a different feel than if they were played in the same rhythms, but on all six strings throughout.

2 PLAY "WATERBOUND"

Once you've practiced both patterns on a C chord until they feel second nature, try plugging them into the chorus of the traditional song "Waterbound," written in the key of C major in **Example 2**. This excerpt uses three chords: C, F, and G. Note that for the G (technically a G5, because it's missing the third, B), I sometimes mute the fifth string with the inside of my second finger, but you can instead play the B on string 5, fret 2, with your first finger.

Heads up on the quick chord changes, two per bar, in measures 6 and 7. Be sure to keep your picking hand moving as you switch between the two shapes. The end of bar 6 reveals a useful switching trick—you can always strum the open strings, which buys you time to get to the next chord shape. Also, remember to experiment with the position of your picking hand—the closer to the bridge, the brighter the tone. I like to strum songs like this with my hand near the bottom of the soundhole, but be sure to experiment with placement to find out what sounds best to you.

For additional practice on these strumming patterns, see the accompanying video at AcousticGuitar.com, in which I demonstrate "Waterbound" at different tempos, and in the keys of D and G. I also give the bluegrass tune "New River Train" a similar strumming treatment in G.

3 DELVE INTO SOME WALTZ PATTERNS

All of the previous strums have been in 4/4 (or common time), four quarter notes per measure. Now let's talk about 3/4 or waltz time, with three quarters in each bar. First try a basic strumming pattern (**Example 3a**), which features a brush on the bass strings on beat 1, followed by fuller strums on 2 and 3, all using downstrokes. What that does is emphasize the rhythm a little differently than if you were playing big strums on all three beats. Next try the variation shown in **Example 3b**, which adds an upwards strum on the "and" of beat 3.

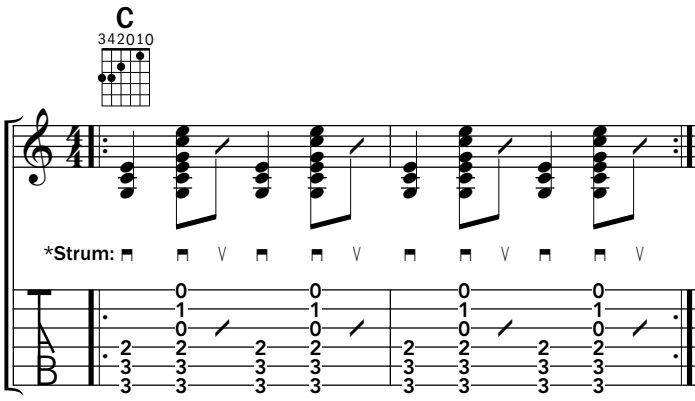
4 WORK ON "IN THE PINES"

After you're comfortable with those basic 3/4 strumming patterns, you can use them in a tune. **Example 4** shows the second pattern put to use in the chorus of the traditional American folk song "In the Pines" (aka "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?"). You can also try adding an up strum on the "and" of beat 2, as I demonstrate in the video, and mixing and matching the different 3/4 patterns in the same song.

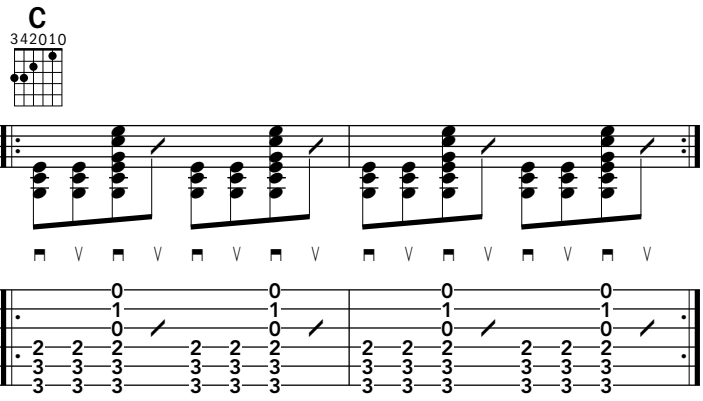
If you have diligently practiced these examples, then you will have moved forward in your strumming skills. Stay tuned for the next lesson, where we'll get into some more involved patterns that have many good applications.

Cathy Fink is a Grammy Award–winning multi-instrumentalist based in the Washington, DC, area. She teaches bluegrass and Americana guitar and performs around the world with her partner, Marcy Marxer. cathymarcy.com

Example 1a

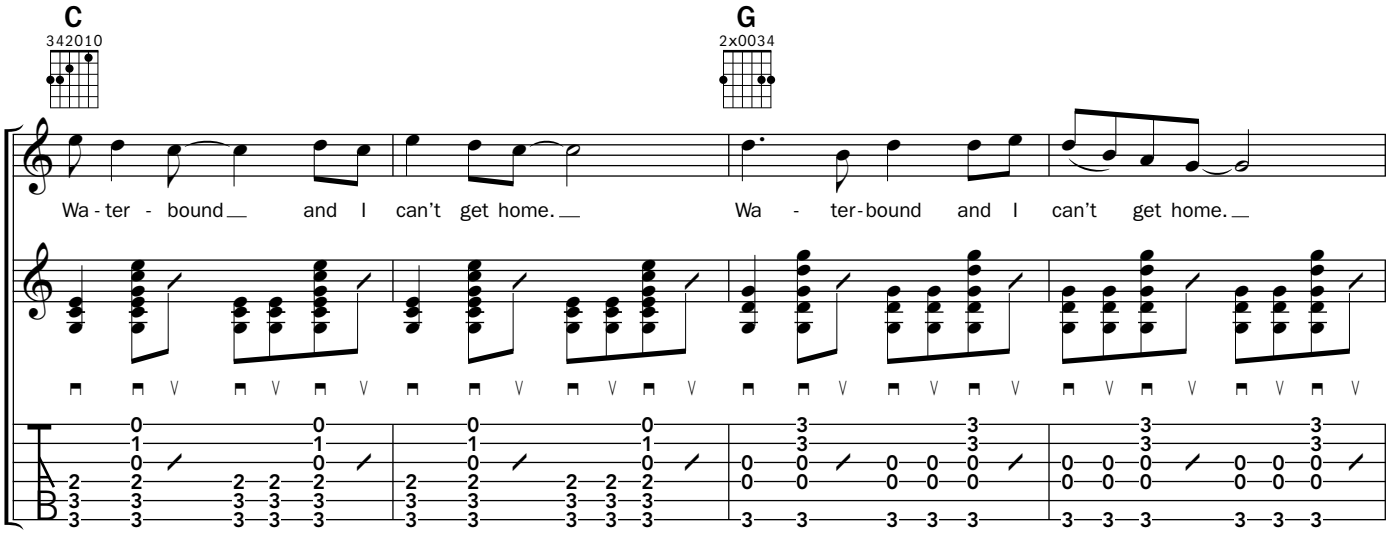


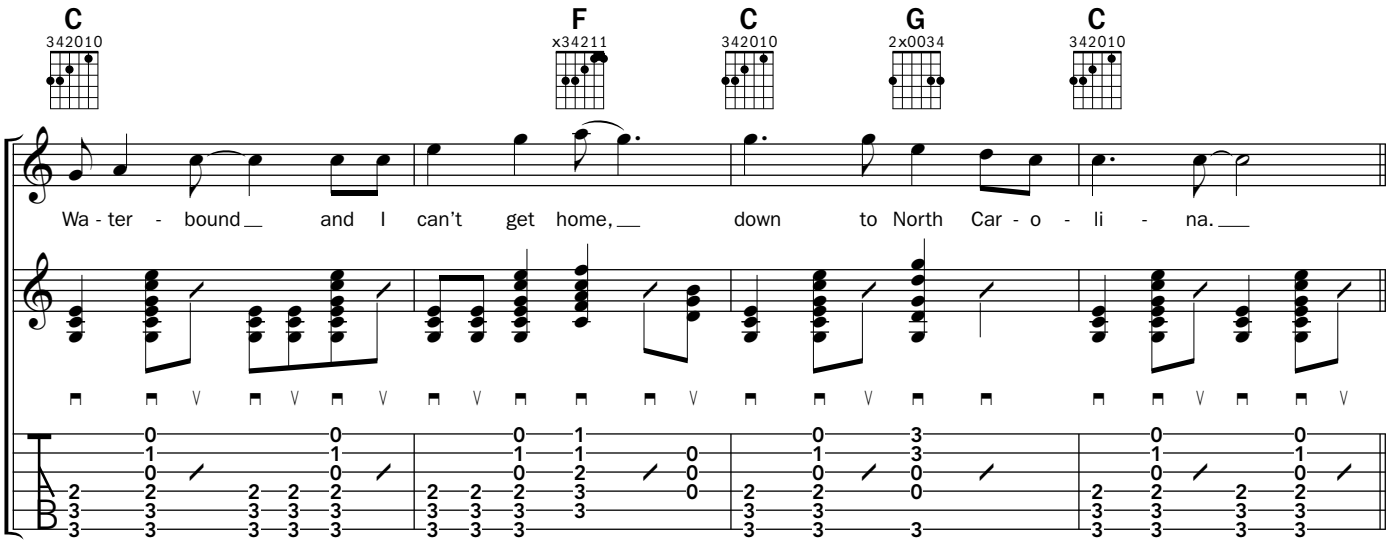
Example 1b



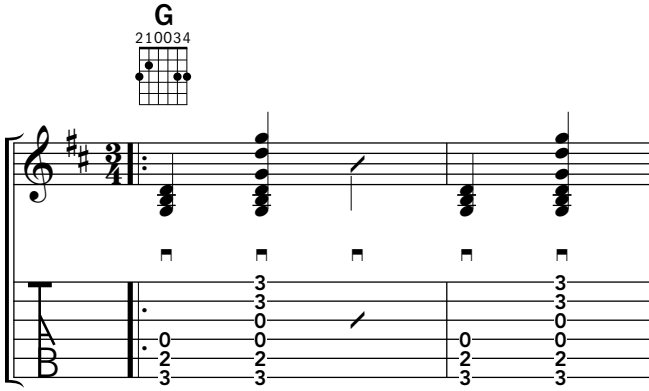
* ⊓ = down; ∨ = up

Example 2

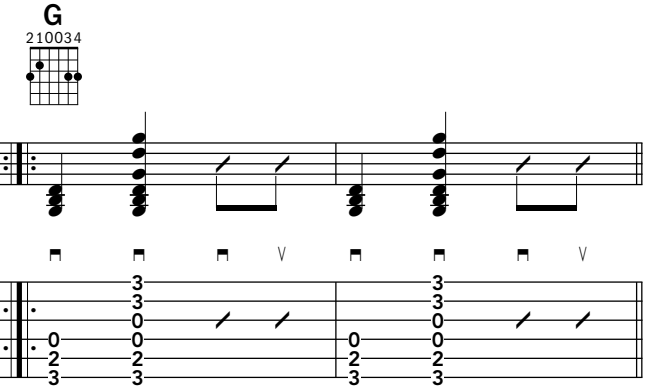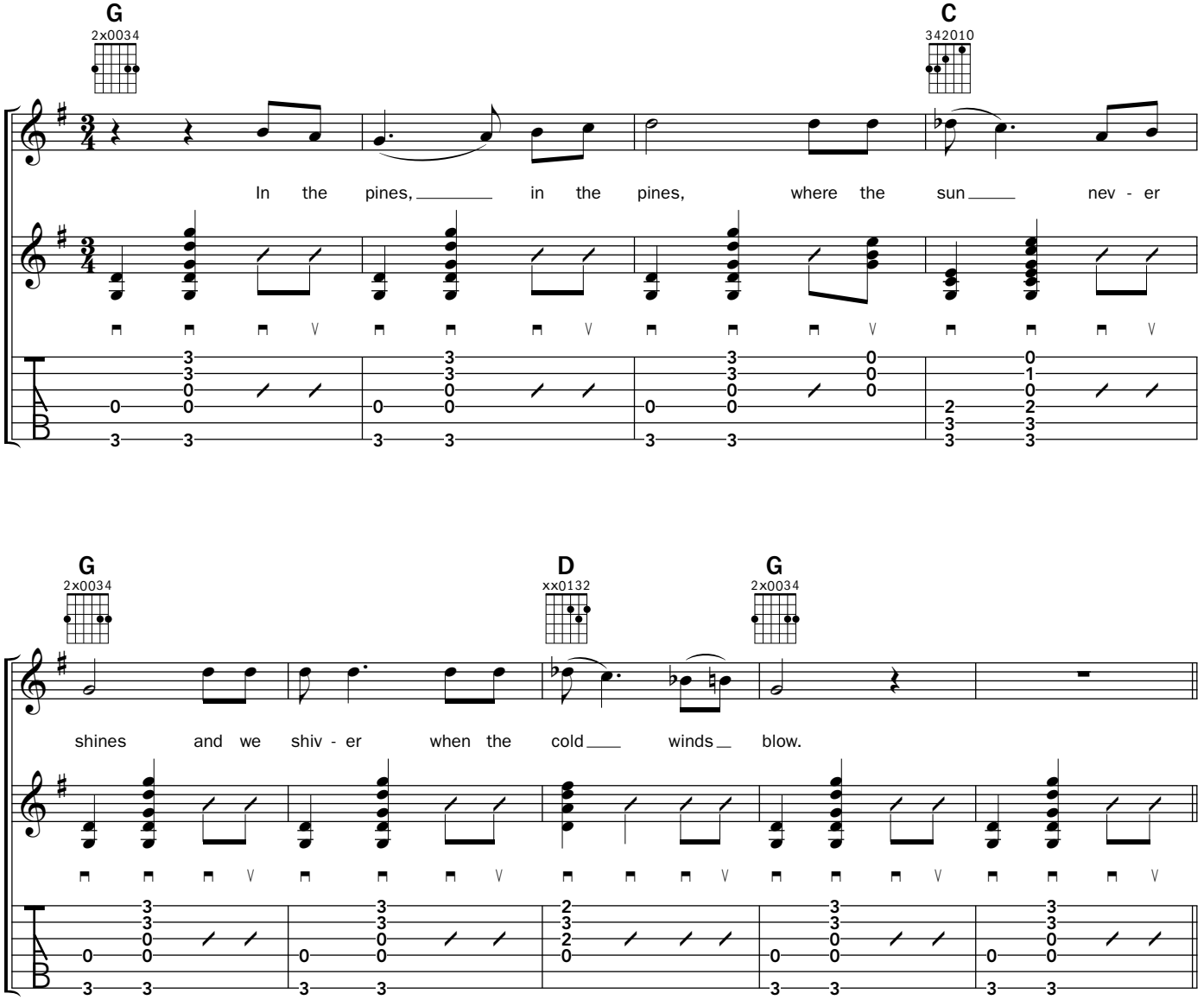




Example 3a



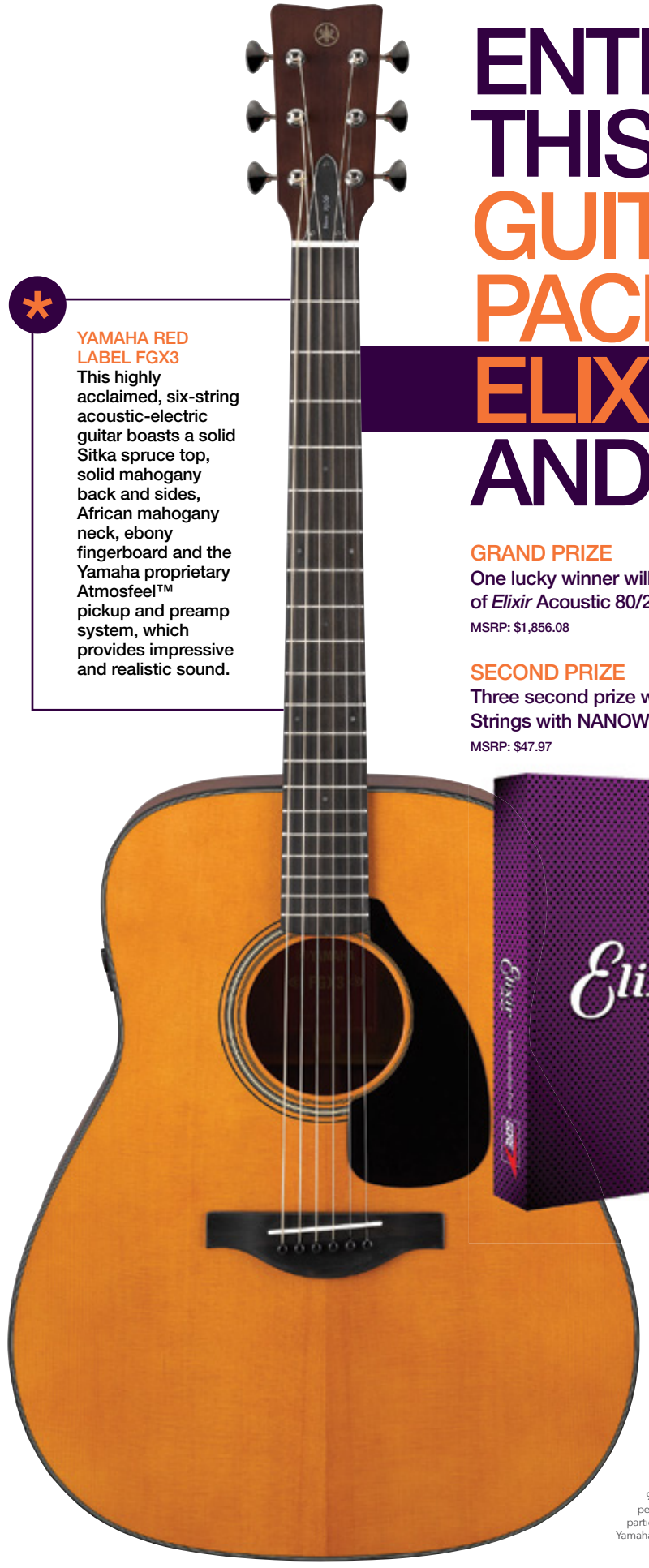
Example 3b



Example 4



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Happy Traum



FRANCO VOGT

Expanding the Tradition

How to create compelling accompaniments and solos for old folk, blues, and gospel songs

BY HAPPY TRAUM

I first heard the traditional gospel song "There's a Bright Side Somewhere" several years ago, played and sung by the wonderful fingerstyle guitarist (and *AG* contributor) Mary Flower. We were sitting around swapping songs at a guitar camp, and I was struck by the positive, optimistic message that the song conveyed.

Although I hadn't known the song before Mary showed it to me, a quick Google search revealed that it had been recorded by a bunch of great musicians over the years, including Reverend Gary Davis, Ry Cooder, and Jorma Kaukonen, as well as quite a few gospel choirs. I immediately went home and started working on my own fingerpicking arrangement, which ended up being the title track of my latest album.

My take on "There's a Bright Side Somewhere" contains many of the arranging concepts I've used throughout my musical life—creating moving bass lines, looking for interesting and varied chord choices, adding guitar fills between vocal phrases, and more. In this lesson, I'll explain how I do all that, culminating in a full 16-bar solo on the song. My hope is that you'll be inspired by these ideas and will use them in your own fingerstyle composing and arranging.

STRONG BASS LINES AND INTERESTING CHORDS

For me, one of the secrets to getting a good arrangement is to keep a strong bass line going. I use a thumbpick to get a clear, strong sound on my low strings. A good bass line can suggest interesting ways to reharmonize basic progressions. For instance, **Example 1** depicts the harmonic structure of "There's a Bright Side Somewhere" in its most basic form. Rather than playing the C chord for the first four measures, I add the vi (Am), V/V (D7/F♯), and V (G7), to get a nice moving bass line (C, A, F♯, G, C), as shown in **Example 2**. (Note that in the accompanying video, I use a capo at the second fret, causing the music to sound a whole step higher, in the key of D major.)

Sometimes I look for opportunities to play chromatic bass lines for added spice, as in **Example 3**, based on bars 5–8 of "There's a Bright Side Somewhere," moving in half steps from the first-fret F on the F chord to the third-fret G on the C chord. A nice passing chord, the jazzy F♯dim7 (F♯ A C E♭) in bar 2 is very similar to the D7/F♯ in Ex. 1. The only difference is that it contains the first-fret E♭, rather than the open D string. Playing the C chord in bar 3 with the fifth (G) in the bass, rather than the root (C) is what allows me to get that chromatic bass movement here.

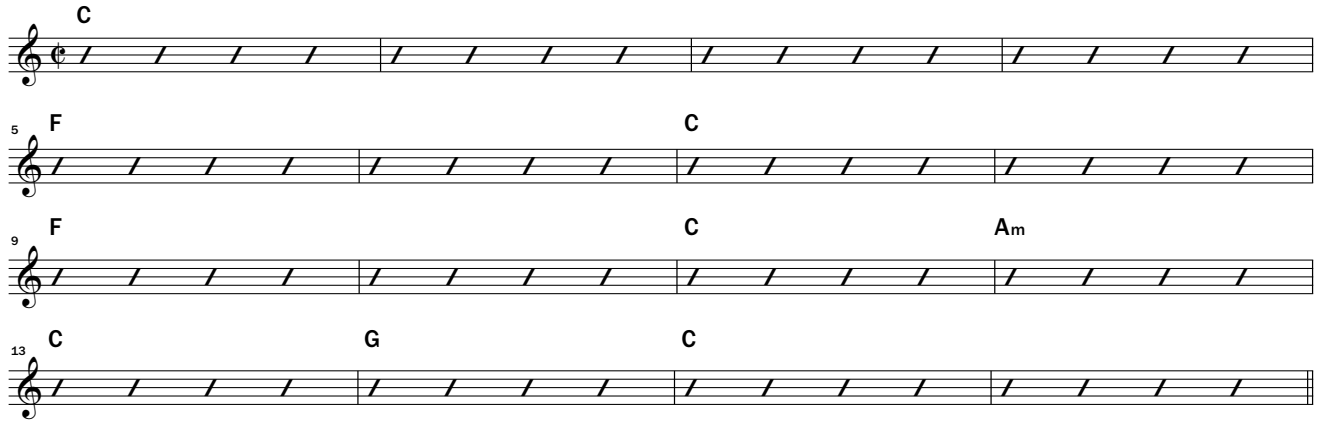
For me, one of the secrets to getting a good arrangement is to keep a strong bass line going.

I use that same chord progression in bars 9–11 of the form (**Example 4**). At the end of measure 11, I add an E7 with the fifth (B) in the bass, which leads smoothly to the Am in the following bar. I love using harmonic surprises like that. For the last line of the form (bars 13–16), I play something similar to Ex. 1, but with the chords falling in different places, starting with C/G, as depicted in **Example 5**. The most important thing in all of the above examples is to keep your thumb moving in steady quarters, as the bass line plays such an important role.

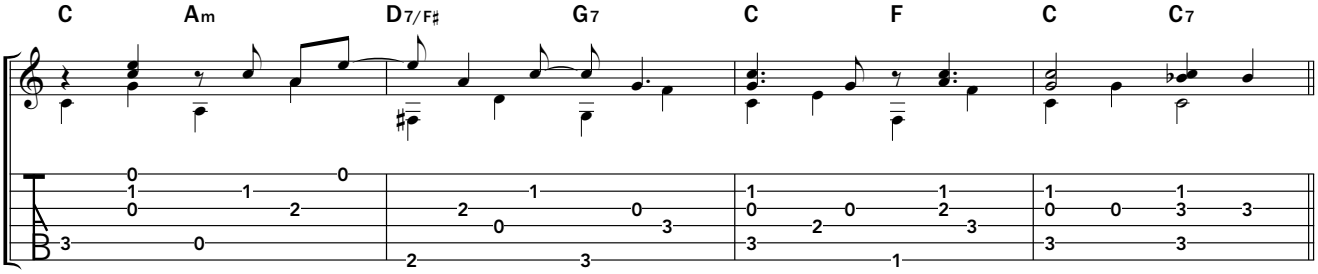
LICKS AND FILLS

To add sparkle to an arrangement, and to switch up the texture, I like to play a series of licks on the high strings in the spaces between the sung lines. There are numerous possible variations on this theme, and I try to mix them up to keep from sounding repetitious. **Example 6** shows how I might approach bars 1–4 of "There's a Bright Side Somewhere," coming out of the I (C) chord, and **Example 7** does the same with bars 5–8. When you're learning a song, I'd highly

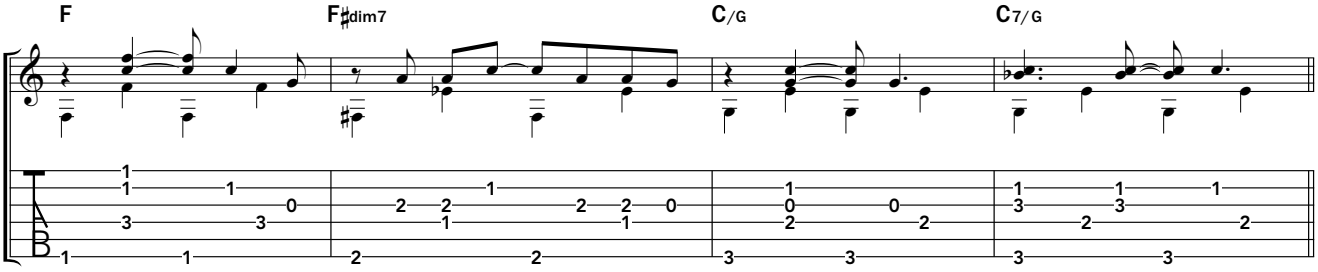
Example 1



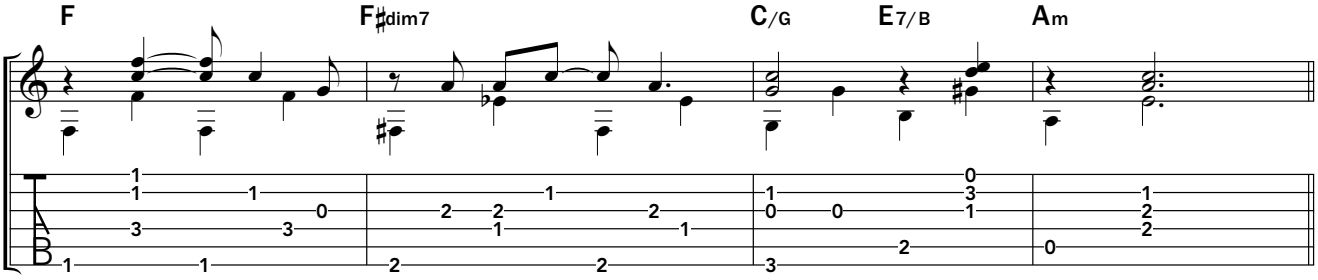
Example 2



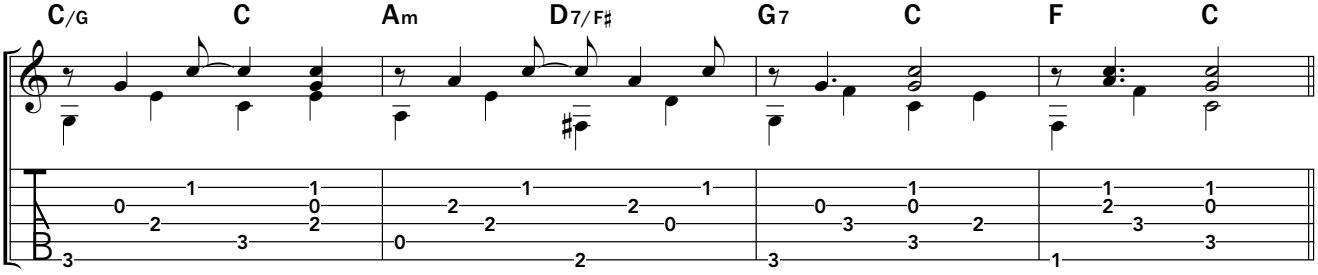
Example 3



Example 4



Example 5



recommend coming up with your own treble runs and committing them to memory. That way, you'll always have plenty of different options at hand, which can help your performance or recording sound fresh and inspired.

SOLOING SECRETS

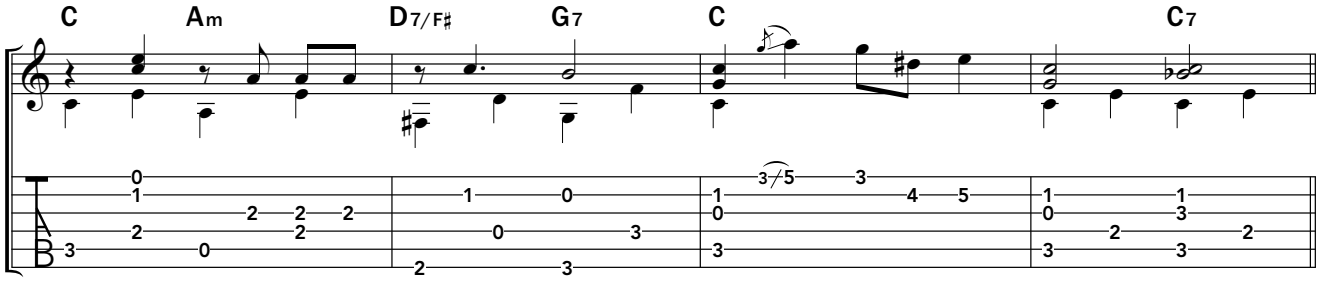
Example 8 ties together all of this lesson's concepts—creating strong bass lines, reharmonizing progressions, and mixing and matching single note fills—with a full solo on the 16-bar form of "There's a Bright Side Somewhere." I never play any solo exactly the same way twice; the transcription captures what I happened to improvise in the video demonstration, but it's pretty representative of my approach.

This solo is a bit more challenging than the other examples, as it moves between patterns in the open position and passages up the neck. In bars 5 and 9, for instance, I play the F chord in fifth position, with the fifth (A) as the lowest note; in bars 6 and 10, I fret a diminished seventh shape in seventh position for an Adim7, sliding it down to the fourth fret for F♯dim7. (Interestingly, both of these chords share the same four notes: A, C, E♭, and F♯/G♭.)

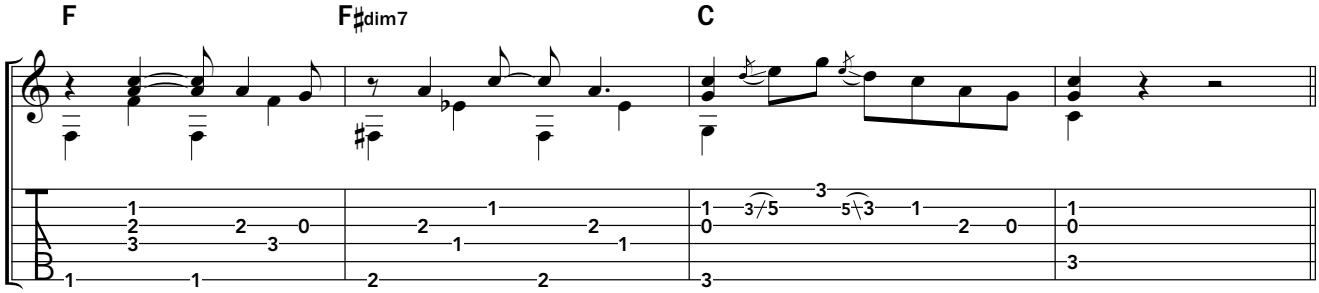
To get a good sense of some variations on this solo, be sure to listen to my album version, which I play a bit more uptempo. Then use the solos as templates for making this or any other traditional song your own.

OK, now I've given away most of my secrets. I hope they help you, whether you're learning "There's a Bright Side Somewhere" or creating arrangements of other traditional songs. Have fun! **AG**

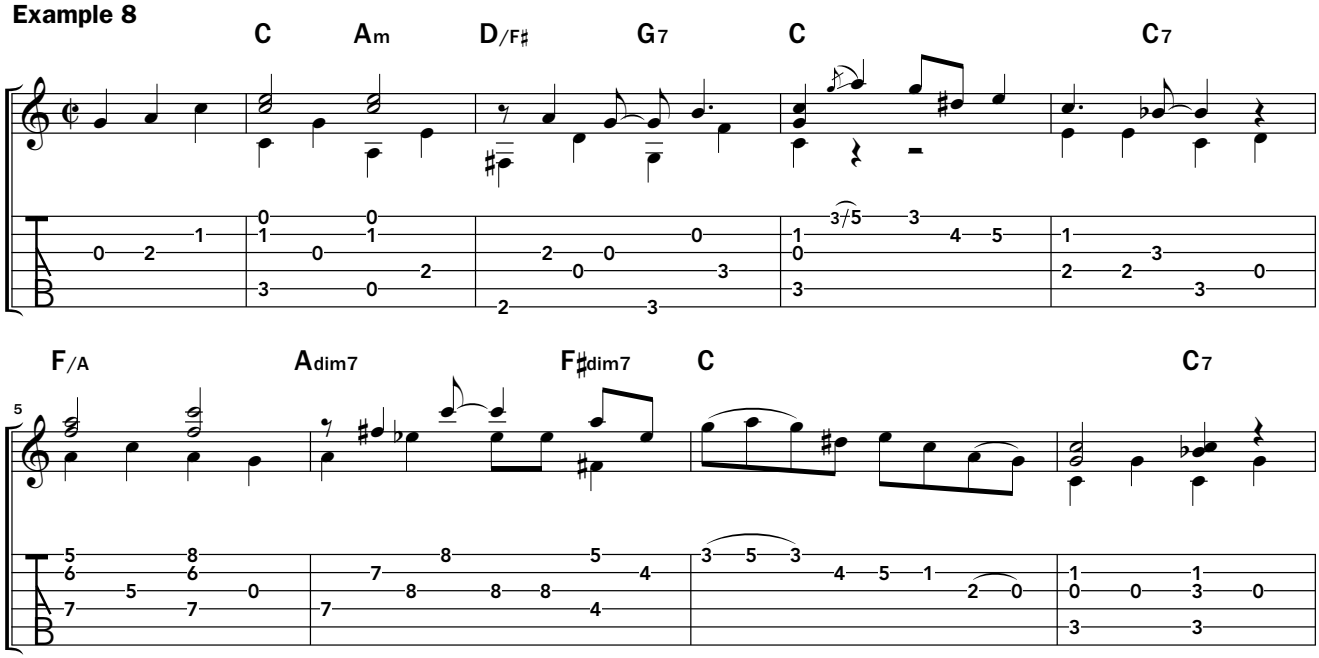
Example 6

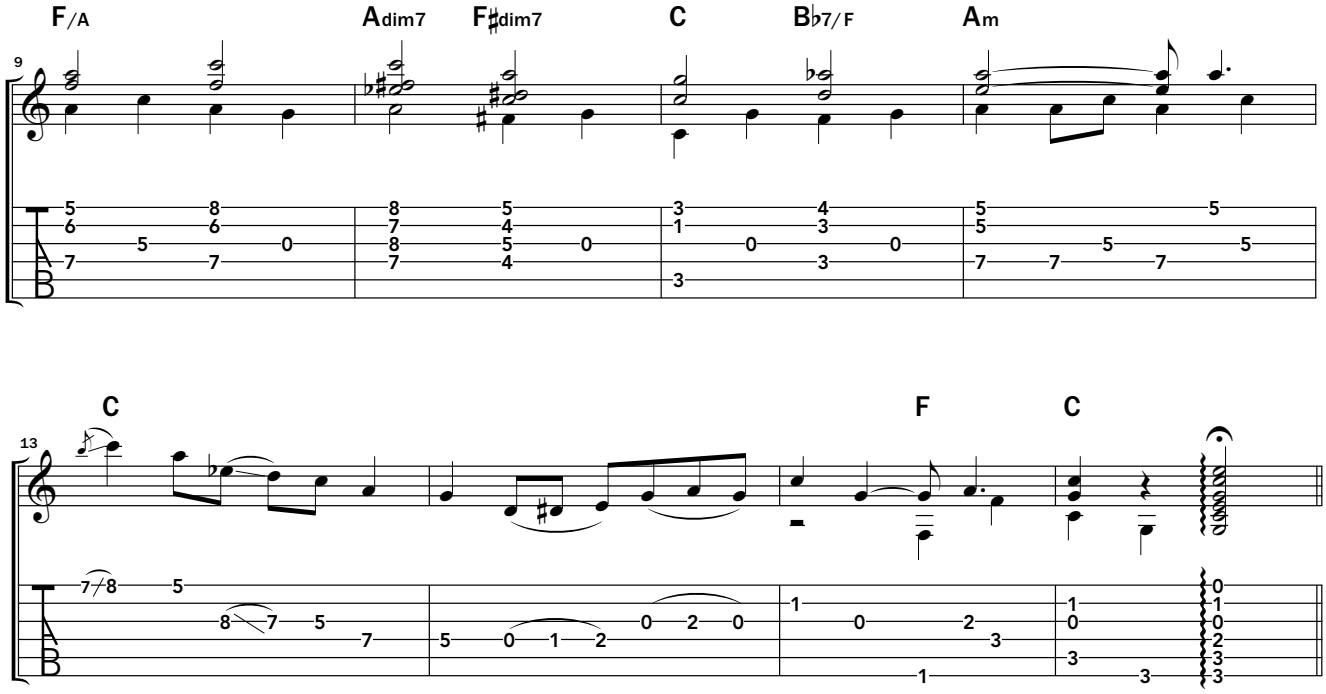


Example 7



Example 8




F/A
Adim7
F♯dim7
C
B♭7/F
Am
9
C
F
C
13


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Intertwining Lines

Try these fun and challenging counterpoint exercises

BY SEAN MCGOWAN

It can be both challenging and incredibly rewarding for guitarists to learn and apply techniques and concepts commonly used by composers, arrangers, and other instrumentalists, which may not be as easy—at least initially—to articulate on the guitar. One such concept is counterpoint. While it's not necessarily intuitive for most guitarists to improvise contrapuntal lines or even write them out (with the notable exception of classical guitarist-composers), it's an approach that is certainly worth the investment and yields dividends equivalent to sonic gold.

Counterpoint can essentially be defined as two or more melodic lines played simultaneously using different note ratios (1:1, 2:1, etc.), directions, and intervals, depending on the type of motion involved. In this Weekly Workout, we'll explore the basic types of counterpoint motion and strategies to use them.

WEEK ONE

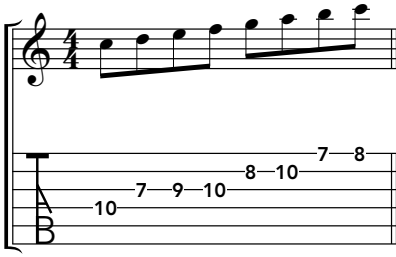
When you embark on creating or improvising contrapuntal lines, I'd recommend beginning by writing down some musical ideas and working them out on the fretboard first. It's important to start from a place of familiarity on the neck. Since most of us are accustomed to playing scale patterns in various positions, first try a simple one-octave ascending major scale pattern, as shown in **Example 1**.

Let's expand on that idea by adding an upper voice in the interval of a third. Here we have an example of *parallel* motion, in which two or more voices move in the same direction, using the same interval. **Example 2** shows the same C major scale, now harmonized in thirds using parallel motion. You're probably used to thinking of this concept as playing double-stops, which are very common and relatively easy to play in a melodic or solo line. Once you get a handle on playing this example, try reversing it to play the same scale line descending. **Example 3** illustrates a longer-form version with a fingering for a two-octave C major scale. Try moving this pattern to other keys or come up with your own patterns.

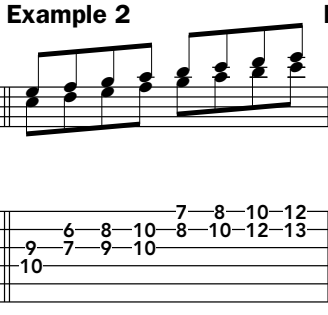
A couple of things to remember—you can play parallel motion lines ascending or descending using any scale or arpeggio, but you must keep the interval consistent (e.g., thirds). The quality of the interval—for example, a major or minor third—might change according to the scale, but the overall third interval

WEEK 1

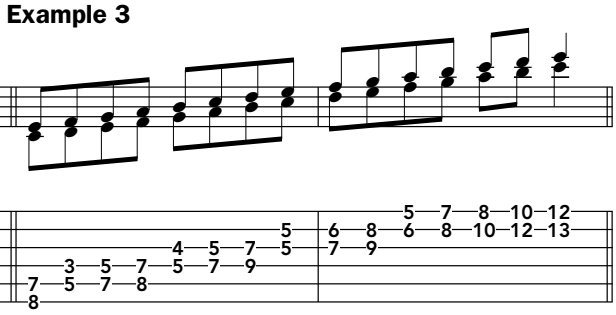
Example 1



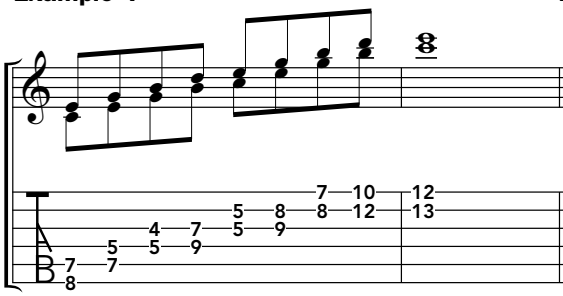
Example 2



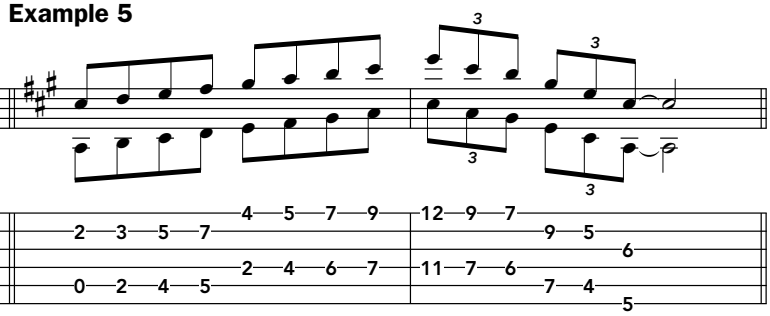
Example 3



Example 4

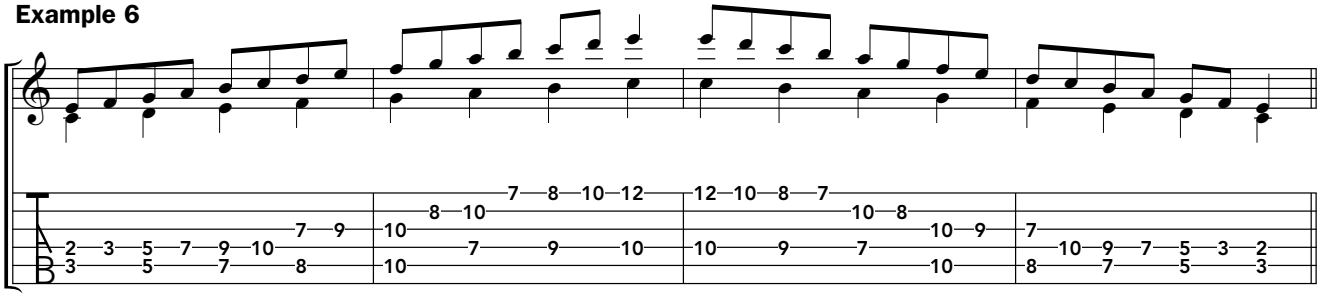


Example 5

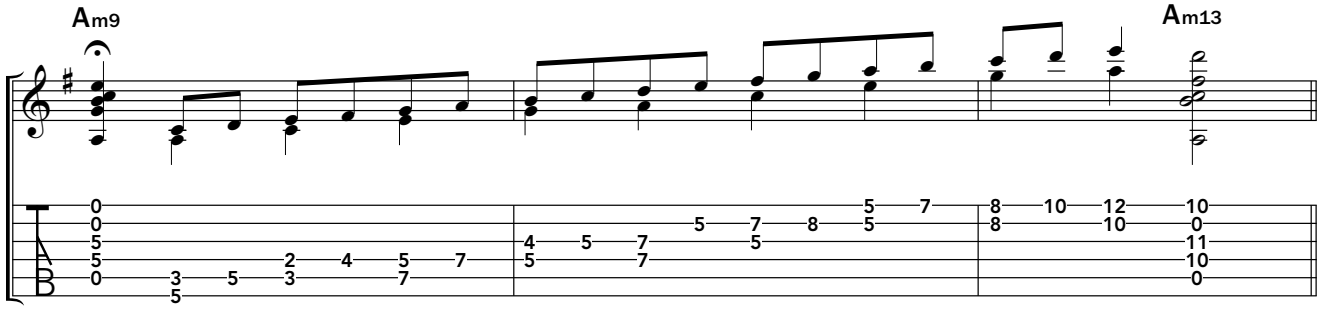


WEEK 2

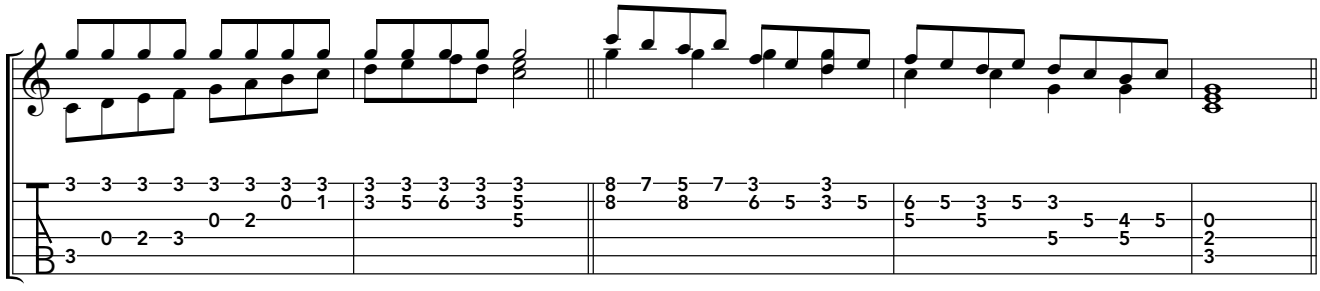
Example 6



Example 7



Example 8



Example 9

Beginners' Tip #1

Notice that you may need to change up the pattern or fingering of a scale you're used to playing to accommodate the second voice. This might involve shifting positions, changing strings and/or fingerings. Think of the notes first, then find a comfortable way to play them in time.

remains consistent throughout. In **Example 4** we're using the notes from the C major scale, but this time moving through the arpeggio. Notice that the bottom line simply outlines a Cmaj7 arpeggio (C E G B); when you harmonize that with the top line playing a third above each note, you get an additional note (D on top of the B), which creates a beautiful Cmaj9 sound. Try this concept with familiar minor- and dominant-seventh chord arpeggio shapes you already know.

Example 5 illustrates parallel motion with a line built in tenths, ascending through the major scale and descending using an arpeggio figure, all in the key of A major. Again, you can use any interval in parallel motion, but thirds and tenths—think The Beatles' "Blackbird" or Bach's "Bourreé in E Minor"—are particularly strong and will always sound great. There's an added technical bonus, too, as playing in tenths will help to build your horizontal position-shifting technique to cover a lot of ground on the fretboard, as opposed to staying only in one position.

WEEK TWO

Now let's expand upon the parallel motion idea. *Similar* motion uses the same concept as parallel—two or more lines moving in the same direction—but allows for the mixing of different interval combinations. Let's look at **Example 6**, which features an ascending and descending C major scale using two separate lines. Here we are expanding the overall line to a 2:1 ratio (i.e., two notes in the top line for every one note in the bottom, or vice versa).

Beginners' Tip #3

If possible, try to stay within a three-to-four-fret position span when starting to explore contrary motion. This will give you a solid foundation to work from (i.e., a familiar scale pattern), and also avoids any unnecessary and painful stretches.

The previous week's examples all used a 1:1 ratio, and of course you could expand this idea using 3:1 (triplets), 4:1, etc. When we employ a 2:1—as in Exs. 6 and 7—the result is a beautiful sound that results in a dramatic, sweeping arc motion, because the intervals gradually expand and contract between small, medium, and larger intervals. It almost sounds like the line is opening and closing as you move up and down through the example.

Example 7 continues this concept of similar motion, this time moving through an Am9 Dorian sound. In contrast to Ex. 6, this time we are keeping the intervals a little tighter in structure, sticking to thirds, fourths, and fifths. An example like this paired with chord voicings on either side can make for a striking solo cadenza at the end of a song, or an interesting break in between various sections.

Examples 8–10 introduce a new concept of counterpoint: *oblique* motion. Oblique motion simply means one voice—upper or lower—stays on the same note or pitch, while the other voice moves up or down. This is a sonorous technique that can thicken up your sound in a solo context and create the sonic texture of a pedal point in all registers (i.e., not just a bass pedal). **Example 8** shows an ascending C major scale under a top voice of G, essentially serving as an upper pedal point. With that in mind, strong chord tones such as the root, third, or fifth all make excellent choices for static pedals.

In **Example 9**, the pedal points pivot between the fifth (G), appearing as an upper and lower voice, and the root (C), all within a C major scale. This strong but subtle technique offers a fantastic middle ground between playing solo lines and chords. **Example 10** offers a modal example (G Dorian/B♭ Lydian) that features oblique motion in a 3:1 triplet ratio against an upper and lower pedal point. As you can see, it's good to take advantage of an open string whenever possible for the pedal point. Try playing the triplets both as picked notes and slurring with hammer-on and pull-off combinations.

While parallel motion lines can be easily played fingerstyle or using a pick, as soon as the line involves string-skipping as in similar and oblique motion, you will need to shift to a hybrid technique with the pick. Thumbpicks are ideal for this type of playing, or you may want to experiment playing the lines with the thumb and middle finger while holding the pick under the index finger. Personally, I prefer playing fingerstyle and articulating the lower line with the thumb and the upper line(s) with the index and middle finger of the picking hand. But feel free to experiment with a technique that works for you—there's always a solution!

Beginners' Tip #2

When playing through 2:1 lines, pay close attention to the duration of the longer note, making sure it sustains for its full value. To do this, you will also have to pay close attention to the fingerings you use. Try using different fingers for each individual note, as opposed to a partial barre or fretting two notes with one finger. Agility of motion is very important when playing counterpoint lines.

WEEK THREE

This week we'll take things up a notch and introduce *contrary* (sometimes known as *contrasting*) motion, which features two different lines moving in opposite directions. Of the various types of contrapuntal movement, contrary is the most challenging on guitar—especially when compared to a linear instrument such as the piano. **Example 11** shows a common C major scale pattern in eighth position, utilizing contrary motion. Here, we are starting with a large gap and moving inward, by way of the lower voice ascending and the upper voice descending, before meeting in the middle with the unison C on the last beat of the second measure.

Incidentally, don't worry about stretching to play both of those C notes on the fifth and tenth frets in the tab—those are indicated for reference only. Experiment with different fingerings and choose one that works for you. Then try playing through this scale pattern starting in different places (e.g., lower voice on C and the upper voice on a high E, etc).

Example 12 shows a short line that would sound great in a blues context. This example uses notes from the Dorian mode combined with the minor blues scale to create an interesting moving effect, like two horns interweaving a background line. **Example 13** offers another possibility in A minor and also shows

Beginners' Tip #4

Try to come up with examples of parallel, similar, oblique, and contrary motion in one of your favorite songs, or over a common chord progression such as the blues progression in Ex. 14. Applying these concepts to "real music" will deepen your understanding of when and how to incorporate these textures easily and successfully.

the potential for coming up with succinct but effective lines that sound great and are easy to play over just about anything.

WEEK FOUR

Now we're ready to put all of these concepts and techniques to use in a ubiquitous setting: a 12-bar blues progression. **Example 14** is based on a simple I–IV–V 12-bar blues progression in the key of G, and explores the different types of motion you could use when soloing, or even playing rhythmic ideas and riffs behind another soloist. Let's break this down.

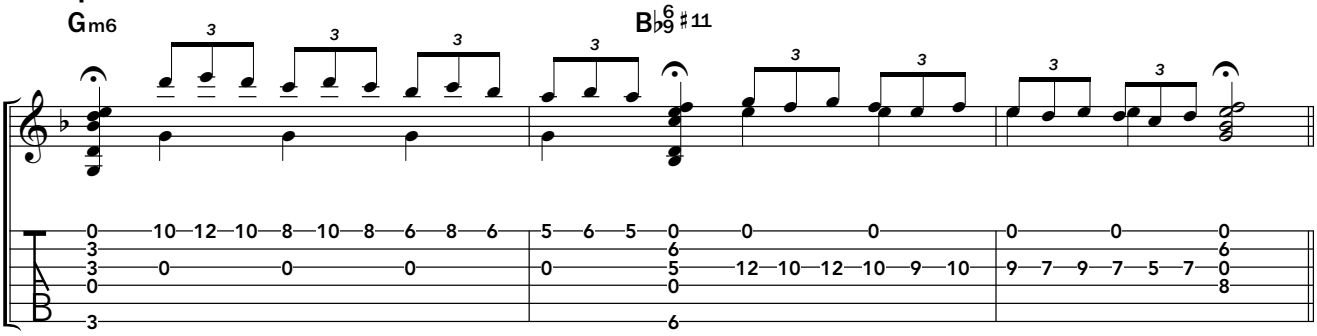
The first bar features a common blues line using parallel motion (moving up and down in fourths) while the second bar expands with a contrary motion line, resolving with a C13 chord voicing. Measures 3 and 4 combine oblique and parallel motion with an open G string pedaling below ascending double-stops in thirds.

The next two bars (the IV chord, C7) feature 1:1 parallel motion using sixths, and a quick 3:1 chromatic figure before getting into a couple of chords that serve to set up the following G7 chord. I like to change up the texture between counter lines and chords, as it creates the illusion of more than one instrument playing. Measures 7 and 8 (G7) depict this strategy by using contrary motion topped off with a G13 voicing to complete the phrase.

Now we've made it to the last four bars and the turnaround. Bars 9 and 10 (D7 and C7) feature oblique motion with a blues line under an upper pedal point on the root. This is a common technique used by organists that blues and jazz guitarists such as Stevie Ray Vaughan and Pat Martino utilized to great effect. Finally, starting in bar 11, we have a classic blues turnaround riff that showcases contrary motion before wrapping up the chorus with full-bodied 13th chords.

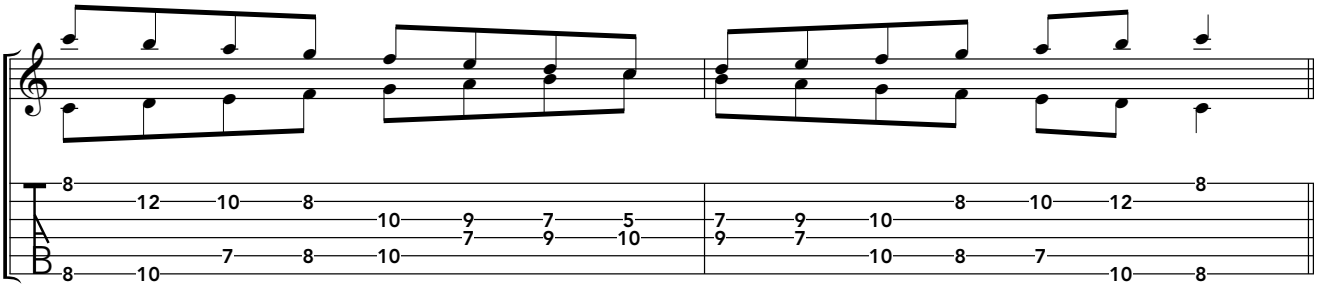
Sean McGowan is a jazz and acoustic musician who directs the guitar program at the University of Colorado Denver. seanmcgowanguitar.com

Example 10

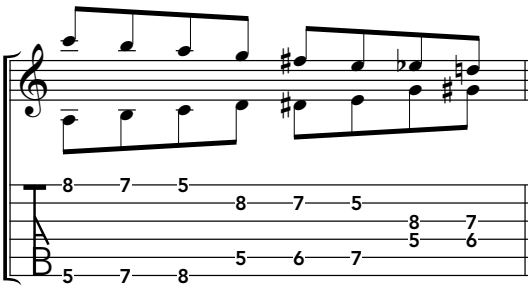


WEEK 3

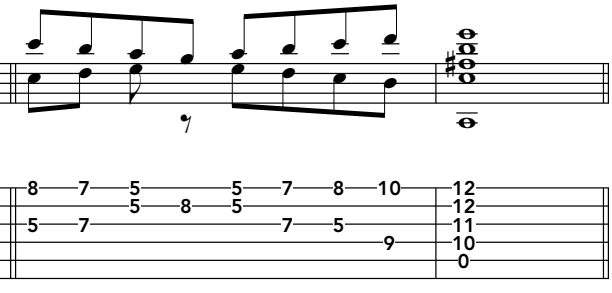
Example 11



Example 12

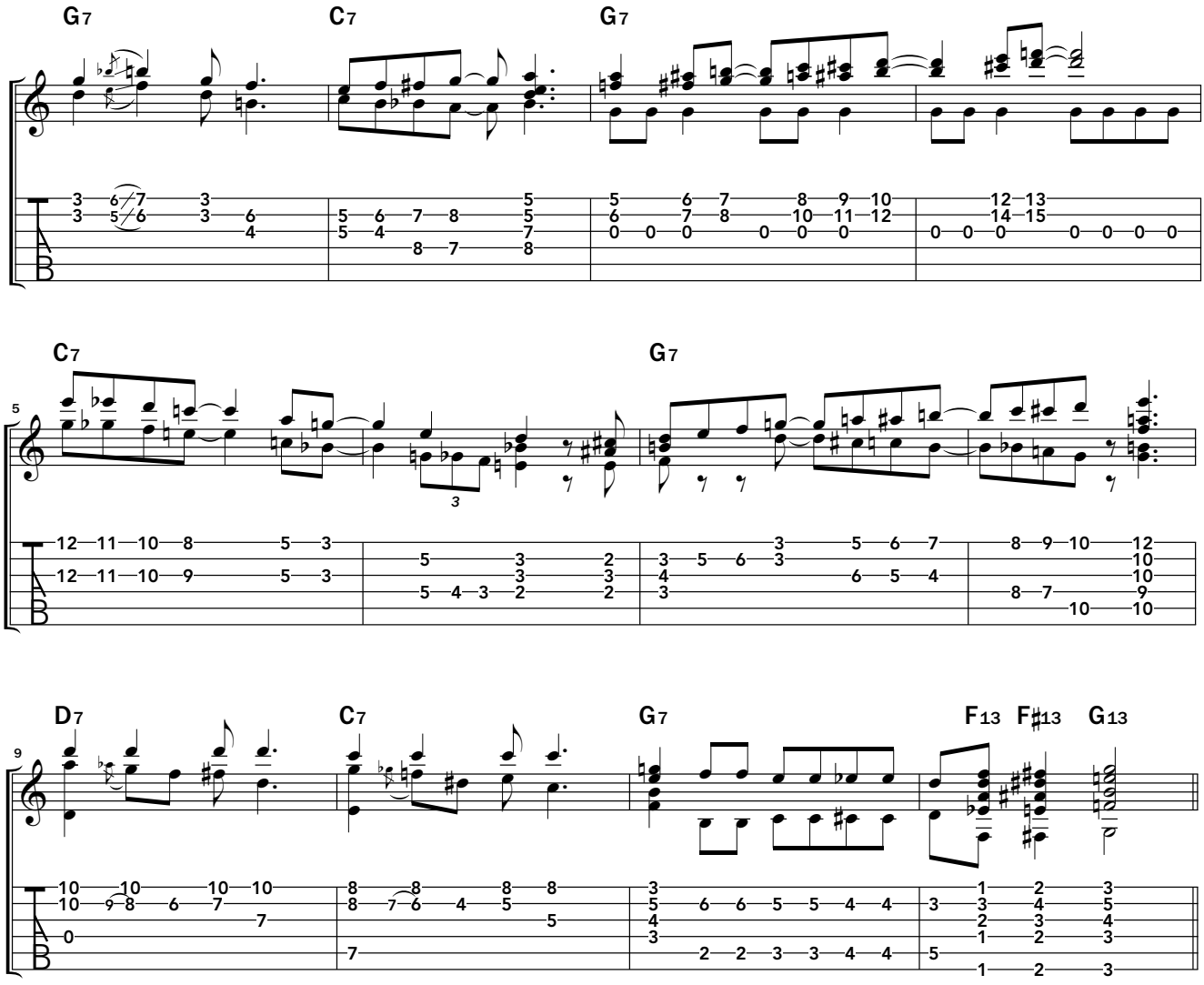


Example 13



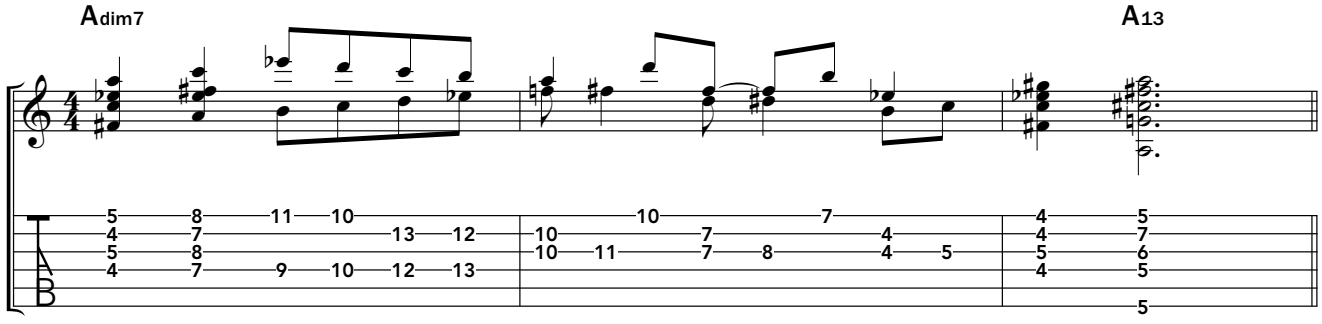
WEEK 4

Example 14



TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Here's an interesting example that incorporates diminished-seventh chords, contrary motion, and constant structure (moving the same shape up or down the neck) that would sound great as the ending lick or break in a blues.



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ACOUSTIC CLASSIC

READERS' PICK

What's Going On

An unplugged version of Marvin Gaye's R&B masterpiece

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

In a recent *AG* reader survey, Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" was among the top 20 most requested songs. It came as a bit of a surprise, given that this R&B classic has nary an acoustic guitar in its swirling arrangement, featuring members of Motown's in-house band, the Funk Brothers, as well as the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. But the song, in the guitar-friendly key of E major, lends itself quite nicely to an acoustic treatment.

"What's Going On," from the 1971 Tamla/Motown concept album of the same name, almost never existed. The label's founder, Berry Gordy, initially feared that the record, with its political and societal commentary, would ruin Gaye's career. Instead, of course, both the song and the album became widely celebrated as the singer-songwriter's finest work—and an undisputed masterpiece of the entire R&B canon.

The arrangement here is based on the supportive part Robert White played on electric guitar on the original recording, which works just as well on acoustic. As shown in the notation, try playing just the chords' root notes at strategic points, for a syncopated effect—a rhythmic pattern that you can play throughout the song.

Note that White avoided some of the guitar's lower notes, presumably to stay out of the way of the active lines played by the electric bassist James Jamerson. For instance, during the verse, White strummed just the top three notes of the F♯m7 chord (A, C♯, and E, incidentally an A major triad) and in the chorus, he played another compact form of F♯m7 at the second fret on strings 4, 3, and 2 (the notes E, A, and C♯, respectively). Similarly, on the B13 chord, he omitted the root (B on string 6, fret 7). But in the absence of a bass instrument, you might prefer to use the fuller voicings shown in the chord frames.



TAMLA RECORDS

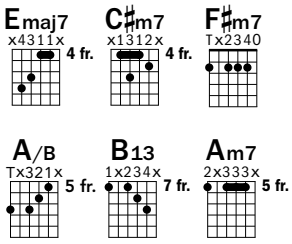
As always, you can play this arrangement exactly as written, but better to use it as a reference for creating your own take on this R&B classic. AG



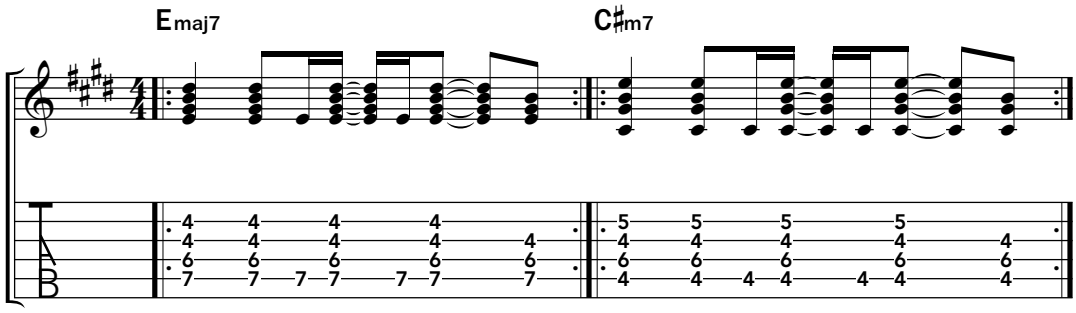
WHAT'S GOING ON

WORDS AND MUSIC BY RENALDO BENSON, ALFRED CLEVELAND, AND MARVIN GAYE

Chords



Accompaniment Pattern



Intro

| **Emaj7** | 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 ||

Emaj7 **C♯m7**
1. Mother, mother, there's too many of you crying

Emaj7 **C♯m7**
Brother, brother, brother, there's far too many of you dying

F♯m7
You know we've got to find a way

A/B **B13**
To bring some lovin' here today, yeah

Emaj7 **C♯m7**
2. Father, father, we don't need to escalate

Emaj7 **C♯m7**
You see, war is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate

F♯m7
You know we've got to find a way

A/B **B13**
To bring some lovin' here today, oh

Chorus

F♯m7 **A/B**
Picket lines and picket signs

F♯m7 **A/B**
Don't punish me with brutality

F♯m7 **A/B**
Talk to me, so you can see

Emaj7 **C♯m7**
Oh, what's going on, what's going on

Emaj7 **C♯m7**
Yeah, what's going on, ah, what's going on

Interlude (with ad lib vocals)

| **Am7** | 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 |

| 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 |

| **A/B** | 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 ||

Emaj7 **C♯m7**
3. Mother, mother, everybody thinks we're wrong

Emaj7 **C♯m7**
Oh, but who are they to judge us simply because our hair is long

F♯m7
You know we've got to find a way

A/B **B13**
To bring some understanding here today, oh

Repeat Chorus

Outro (with ad lib vocals)

||: **Am7** | 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 |

| 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 |

| **A/B** | 𝄎 | 𝄎 | 𝄎 :||

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Breakfast in the Field

An evocative composition from Michael Hedges' debut album

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Michael Hedges



WINDHAM HILL RECORDS/EBET ROBERTS

In 1981, when Michael Hedges first recorded "Breakfast in the Field," two-handed tapping was generally seen as an electric guitar approach used to dazzling effect by players like Eddie Van Halen. But on this meditative composition, inspired by early summer morning visits to a meadow in his hometown of Enid, Oklahoma, Hedges used both hands to fret notes on the steel-string guitar in unprecedented ways.

"Breakfast in the Field" is played in an unorthodox tuning—lowest note to highest, C G D D A E—in which both the lower and upper three strings are arranged in perfect fifths and strings 4 and 3 are in unison. To access this tuning from standard, lower string 6 a major third, strings 5 and 2 a major second, and string 3 a perfect fourth.

An obvious advantage of the tuning is that it allows for the sort of quintal harmony (chords made of stacked fifths) that would be difficult or impossible to play in standard—a language explored by composers like Béla Bartók and Aaron Copland, and seldom heard to this extent in fingerstyle guitar repertoire.

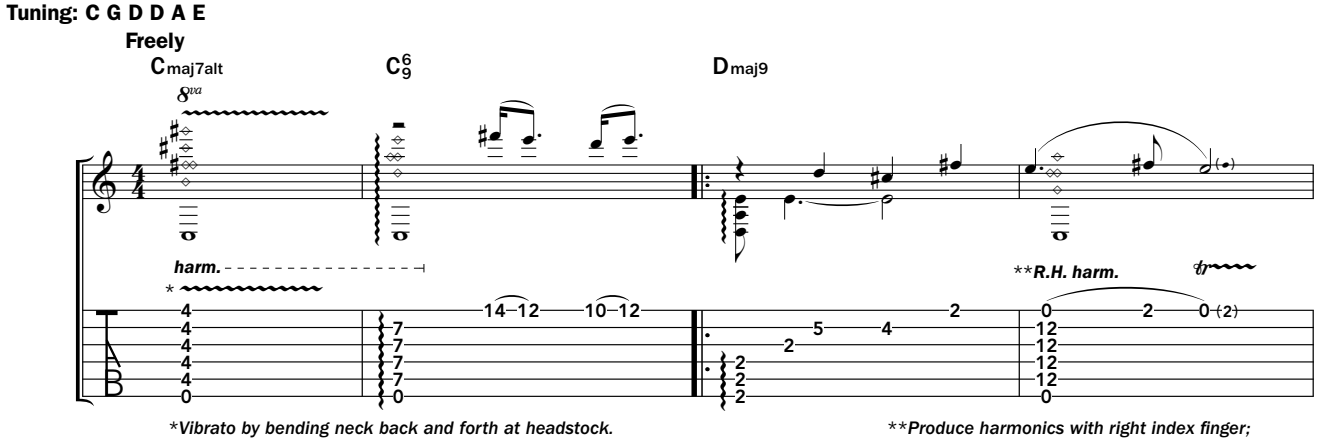
Though the chords are all complex, they are all fretted with just one or two fingers, thanks to the tuning. Stacks of fifths on the top three strings, juxtaposed with those on the bottom three, result in a range of extended harmonies, like Cmaj9♯11 (C E G B D F♯) and Dm11 (D F A C E G).

The piece involves a bit of a dance between the left and right hands, in the service of legato moves not available with conventional fretting. For instance, the natural harmonics in bar 4 are produced with the picking hand's index finger. At the same time, the fretting hand's first finger, which is used to bar all six strings in the previous measure, pulls downward across the strings to sound those harmonics on beat 1, along with the open first and sixth strings.

There are a handful of YouTube videos showing Hedges playing "Breakfast in the Field" in concert, and these should be a helpful supplement to the transcription, as you can see exactly how he is pulling off the extended techniques. Keep in mind that the notation conveys Hedges' studio version from his Windham Hill album of the same name, but the composition is far from static. Be sure to check out the different versions to get a sense of the improvisational possibilities within the composition and the tuning. **AG**

BREAKFAST IN THE FIELD

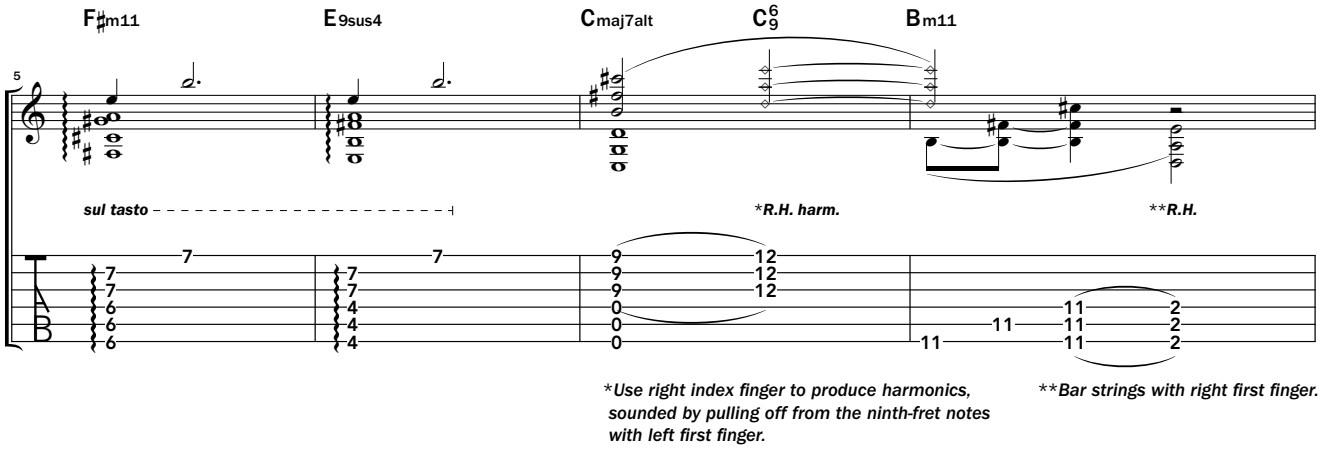
COMPOSED BY MICHAEL HEDGES



*Vibrato by bending neck back and forth at headstock.

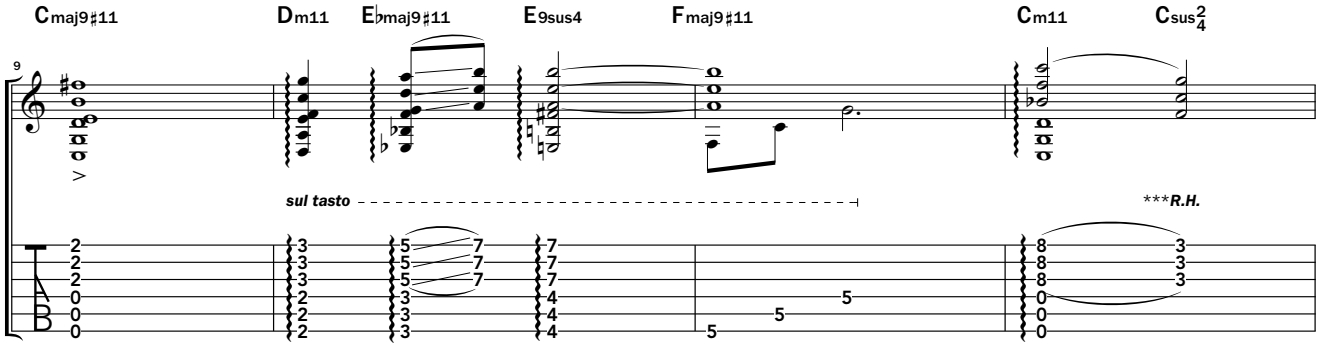
**Produce harmonics with right index finger; sound chord by pulling downward across all six strings with left first finger.

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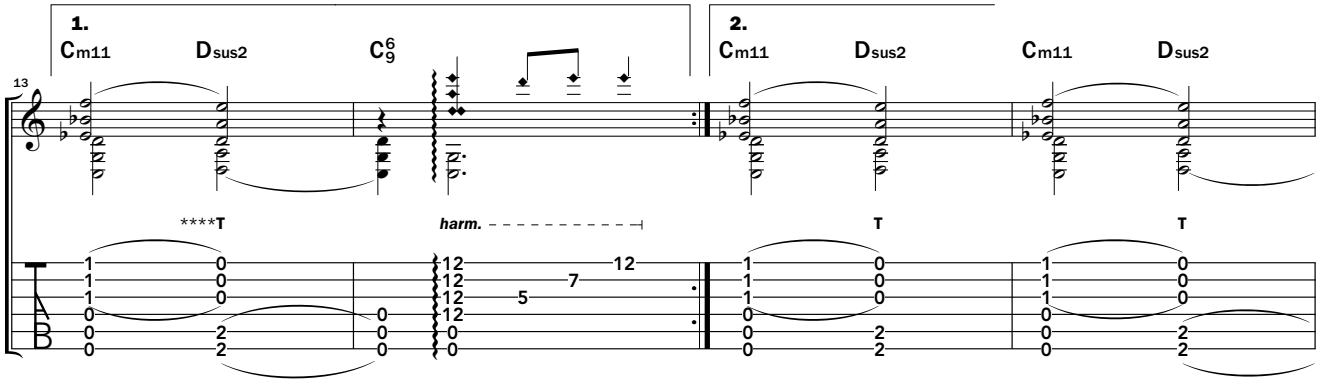


*Use right index finger to produce harmonics, sounded by pulling off from the ninth-fret notes with left first finger.

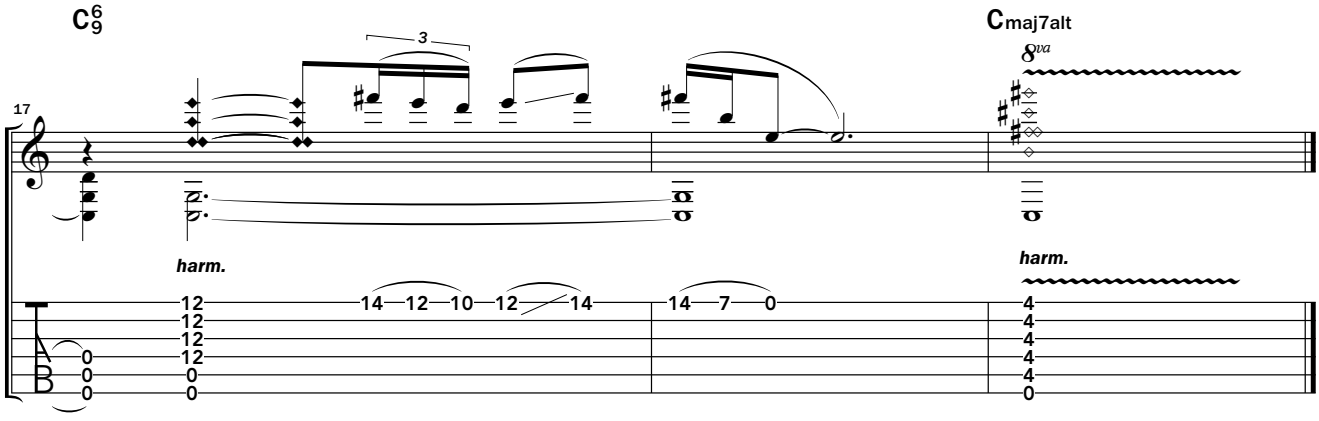
**Bar strings with right first finger.



***Bar strings with right thumb over the neck.



****Tap bottom strings with right first finger.



Silent Night

Open-D bottleneck treatment of the beloved Christmas carol

BY STEVE BAUGHMAN

Here is a nice bit of guitar trivia. "Silent Night," the most beloved Christmas piece ever, was first performed on a guitar. It was December 24, 1818, at the St. Nicholas Church in the Austrian town of Oberndorf bei Salzburg. The local priest, Joseph Mohr, and the choirmaster, Franz Gruber, had composed the song. Christmas Eve was to be its maiden performance before the parishioners and the villagers.

Legend has it that the organ had frozen, so the guitar was the second choice for accompaniment. Not so. Father Mohr was an avid guitar player—at times to the chagrin of his more conservative senior priest—and he often carried his instrument with him as he went about his priestly duties.

Exactly 200 years later, on December 24, 2018, I traveled to Oberndorf to celebrate "Silent Night" with thousands of people from all around the world. We gathered outdoors in front of the reconstructed chapel and then, accompanied by a guitar that was a reproduction of Mohr's instrument, a choir started singing. We all joined in on this historic moment.

Later on the trip I found myself salivating over Mohr's actual guitar, which was on display behind a glass case in the Silent Night Museum, which focuses on the carol. Sensing my keen interest, the docent on duty signaled me over to a cabinet, opened a drawer, and showed me the original manuscript of the song that I have loved since my childhood.

My experiences in Austria inspired the arrangement that you see before you. "Silent Night" was originally done in the key of D major, and I kept it that way because open-D tuning makes it so easy to play as a solo guitar piece. The notes come out nicely in this tuning, with plenty of opportunities for them to linger over their successors—provided you take care to avoid touching neighboring strings and thereby shortening their lives.

I like to play the arrangement with a slide. That's partly because the big G and A chords—which can be played across all six strings at the fifth and seventh frets, respectively—lend themselves nicely to bottleneck treatment, without sounding like a blues version of this tender Christmas song. But the arrangement works just as well when played fingerstyle.

Even if you are a slide player, learn the fingerstyle arrangement first. You will find that the simplicity of the arrangement does not compromise the delivery of this gorgeous and timeless melody. The arrangement is crafted to let the melody float clearly above the arpeggios and bass lines that cradle it. And that is perhaps exactly how Father Mohr used his guitar as he accompanied the church choir on that Christmas Eve over two centuries ago.

Silent Night Chapel in Salzburg, Germany.

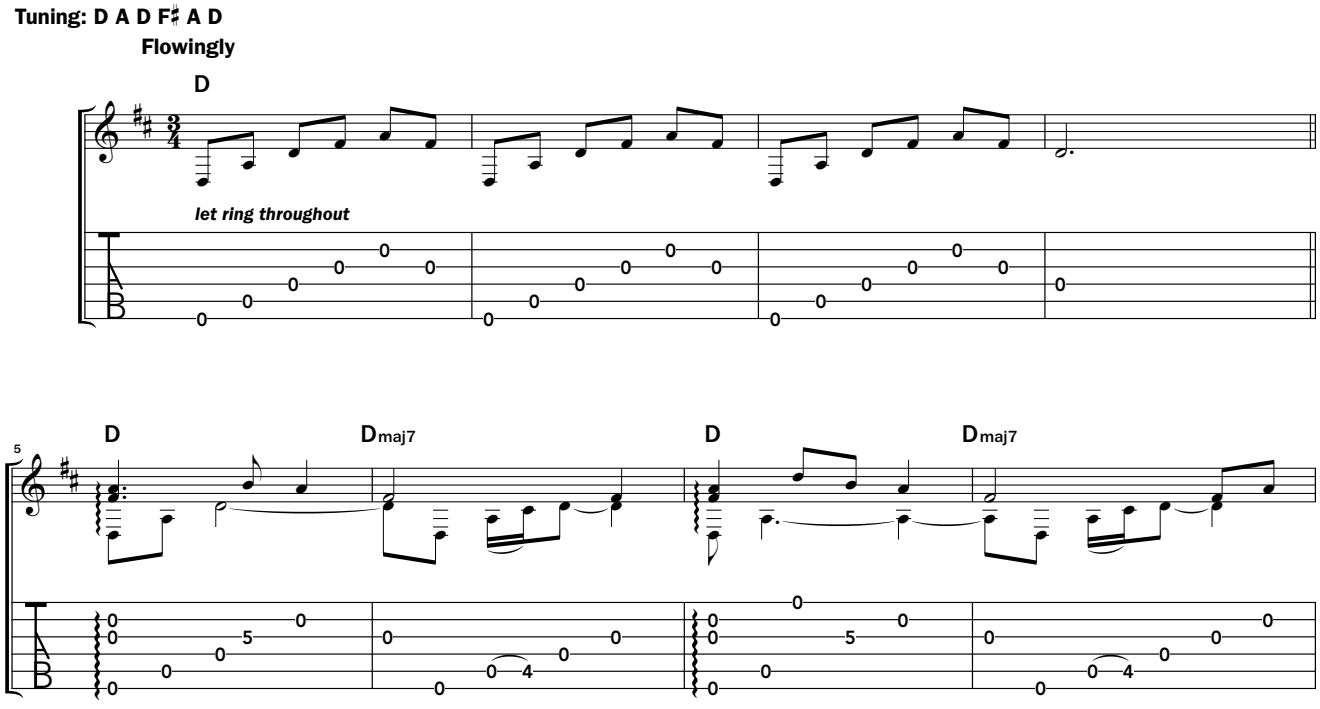


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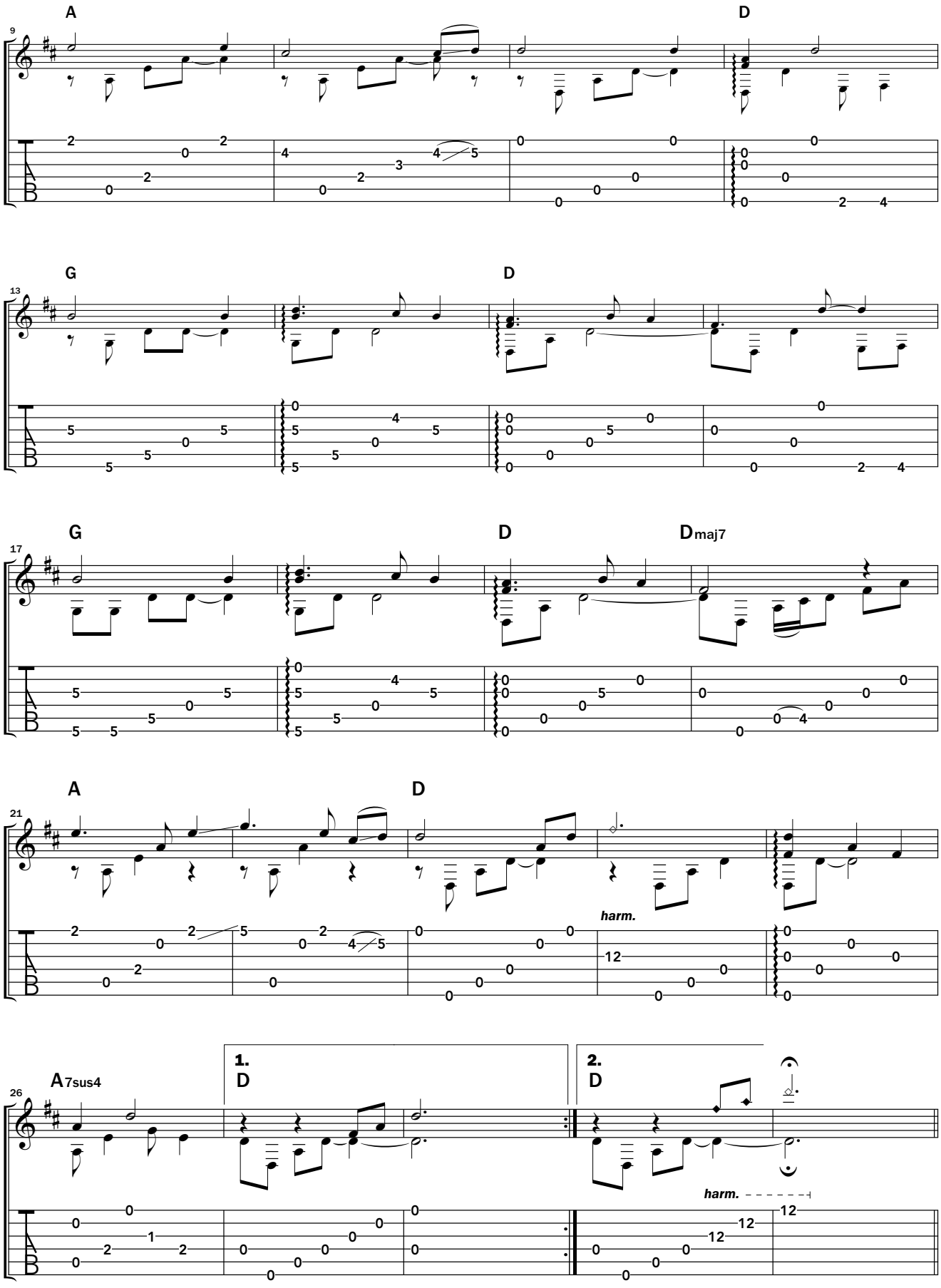
For more seasonal arrangements, check out Holiday Songs for Fingerstyle Guitar, *available at store.acousticguitar.com*.

SILENT NIGHT

BY JOSEPH MOHR AND FRANZ GRUBER



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A
D
G
D
G
D
Dmaj7
A
D
harm.
A7sus4
1.
D
2.
D
harm.

Adam Levy



COURTESY OF ADAM LEVY

Clandestino (Elegy for a Cheesemonger)

How Adam Levy turned a writing prompt into a gorgeous solo guitar remembrance

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Many musicians have found new ways of collaborating during the pandemic, and for Adam Levy, the ace guitarist-composer, singer-songwriter, sideman, and educator, this included hosting a remote writing group from February 2021 to March 2022. Using prompts like "the spy who loved guitar" and "walk-on music for your appearance on a late-night talk show," each member of the group penned 33 new compositions.

One assignment was to write something to celebrate the spirit of someone lost. Levy composed "Clandestino (Elegy for a Cheesemonger)" in honor of Anne Saxelby, a champion of artisanal American cheeses whom he had met at her shop in New York, and who had died of a heart condition in 2021 at 40.

The transcription here is based on a version, available on Levy's Bandcamp page, that the guitarist recorded on his Waterloo WL-S Deluxe. "Clandestino" begins with a playful single-note figure drawn from the D major pentatonic scale (D E F♯ A B), followed by a series of broken sixths. This section reflects the vibe that Saxelby projected in her original shop on New York's Lower East Side. "Her energy was always bright and welcoming," Levy says, "so that suggested the opening theme."

Levy lost touch with Saxelby when he moved to Los Angeles in 2013, and in the years that followed, she grew her business exponentially while raising a family. That period was the inspiration for the main body of the composition, where in bars 5–8 Levy shifts an open D minor chord shape against an open D pedal tone, arriving at a series of striking harmonies. Levy says, "Though I didn't know her then, it seems her life was rich and storied—hence the colorful chords."

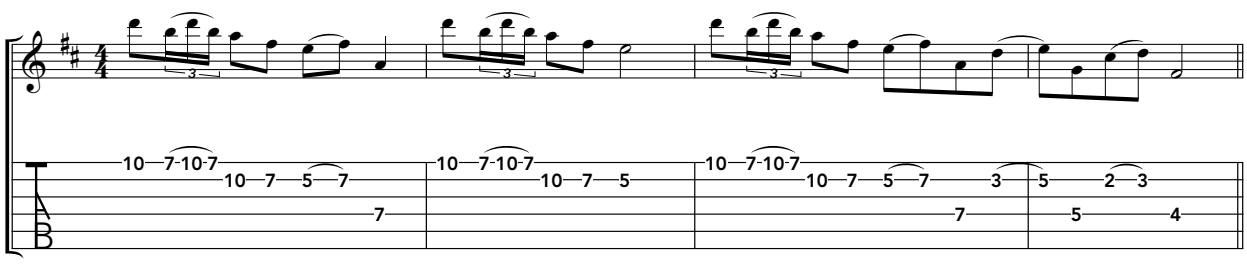
Levy wanted to avoid any sense of sadness in "Clandestino," so to close the piece (bars 21–24), instead of composing a more elegiac section, he chose to repeat the opening theme twice. "I'll always remember Anne that way—as a bright light on the Lower East Side, passionate about locavore cheeses," he says.

For some excellent lesson features by Adam Levy, see Play Guitar Like the Great Singer-Songwriters, *available at store.acousticguitar.com.*
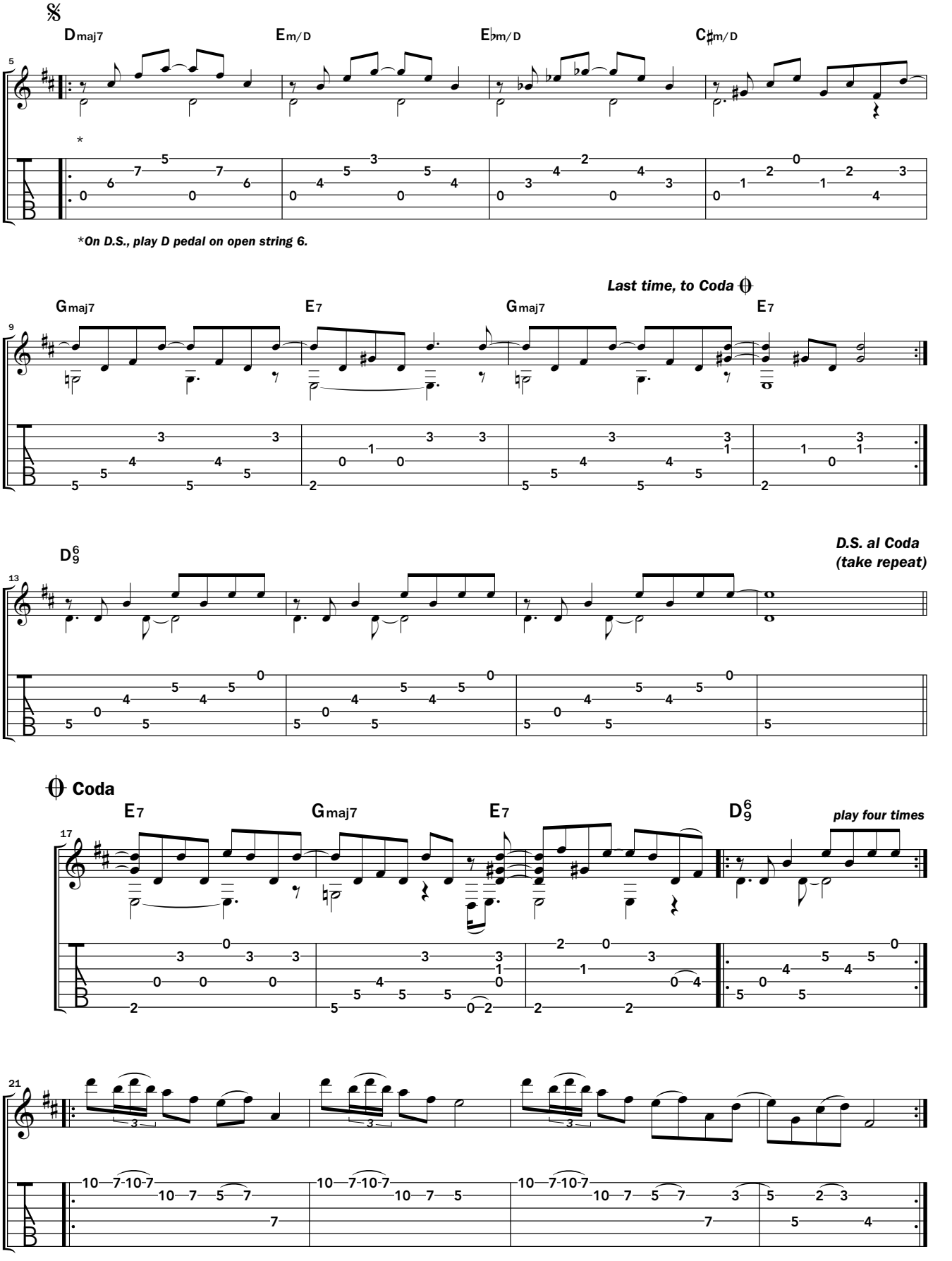
CLANDESTINO (ELEGY FOR A CHEESEMONGER) — BY ADAM LEVY

Tuning: D A D G B E

Freely



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Dmaj7
Em/D
E♭m/D
C♯m/D
*On D.S., play D pedal on open string 6.
Last time, to Coda
Gmaj7
E7
Gmaj7
E7
D6/9
D.S. al Coda
(take repeat)
Coda
E7
Gmaj7
E7
D6/9
play four times

Jon Stickley



COURTESY OF JON STICKLEY

Blackberry Blossom

Exploring Jon Stickley's clever reimagining of an evergreen bluegrass melody

BY ALAN BARNOSKY

"Blackberry Blossom" is a popular fiddle tune played regularly at bluegrass jams and often one of the first melodies that aspiring flatpickers learn. It is so universal that I am not presenting the original version here, though I encourage everyone to seek it out—a quick internet search will yield a multitude of tabs, and a wonderful version from Scott Nygaard is available in the *AG* book *Fiddle Tune Essentials*. In this lesson, we will look at a unique interpretation from genre-bending acoustic guitarist Jon Stickley, released in 2012 on his trio album *JS3*.

This traditional tune has a long history, but the earliest versions don't sound much like the "Blackberry Blossom" we play today. The tune as we know it begins with Fiddlin' Arthur Smith, who rewrote it in the 1930s from earlier renditions he had heard. Smith's melody is identical to the current one, but with the notable exception that the B section is played in E major instead of E minor. The shift to E minor is from fiddler Tommy Jackson who recorded it in the early 1950s. Jackson's version became the standard, with flatpicking recordings appearing in the 1960s and on from Doc Watson, Dan Crary, Norman Blake, Tony Rice, and many others.

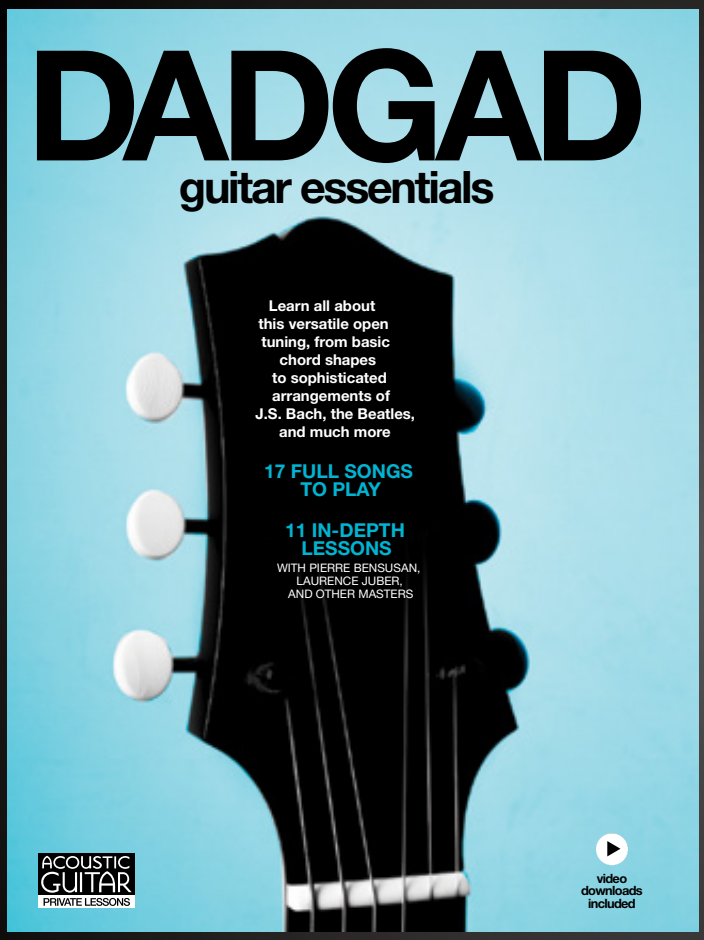
The Jon Stickley Trio—an acoustic instrumental powerhouse that combines Stickley's articulate flatpicking, Lyndsay Pruett's inventive fiddle, and Hunter Deacon's rock-solid drums—has created perhaps the most unique interpretation of "Blackberry" since Smith or Jackson. Initially the trio experimented with the tune at live shows playing the melody over a funk drumbeat. Over time, it added the intro, outro, revised chords, and jam interlude—incorporating elements of rock and jazz throughout—heard on the *JS3* version.

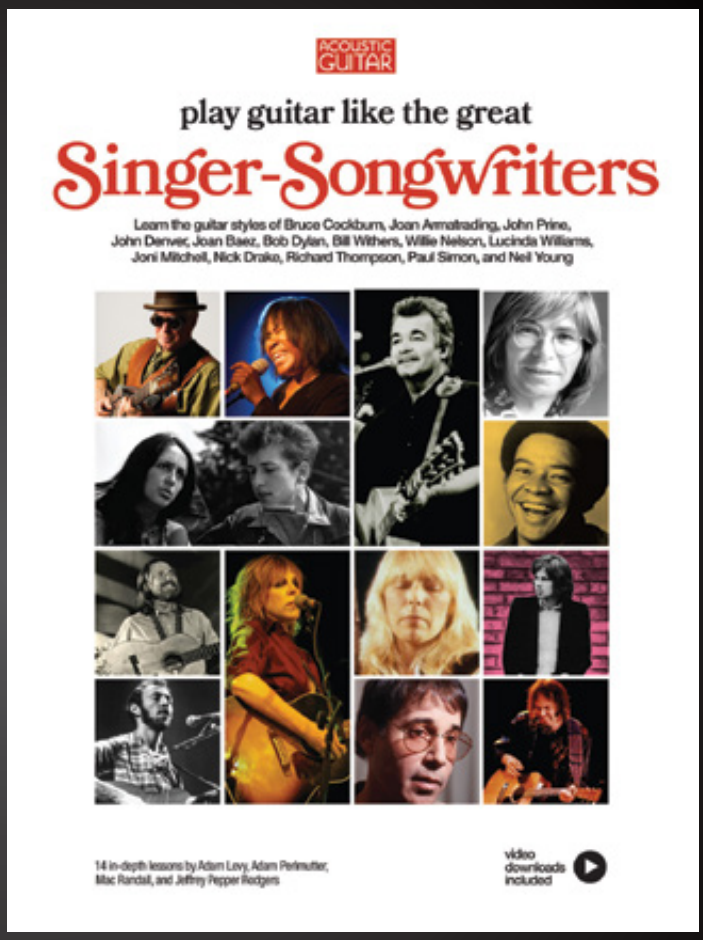
Stickley and Pruitt trade solos throughout, and **Example 1** presents Stickley's initial pass through the tune beginning at 0:40 on the studio recording. The first half of the A section (bars 1–8) closely resembles the traditional melody, while the second half (9–16) veers into a tasty descending scalar pattern and several slippery licks. Measure 17 marks the beginning of the B section, dropped down an octave from where flatpickers normally play it, almost making it sound more metal than bluegrass.

Chord symbols above the staff in Ex. 1 present the standard progression typically used for this song, while **Example 2** shows Stickley's creative use of chord substitutions and unique voicings played during Pruitt's A-section solos. Without a bassist, Stickley's rhythm here drives the momentum forward with a walking bass line, a pulsating rhythm, and a chord progression reminiscent of the Jackson 5 hit "I Want You Back."

The trio's arrangement of "Blackberry Blossom" continues a long lineage of adventurous adaptations of this tune. Stickley told me he thinks of playing the B part as more of an "E7 funk" than of E minor, which is kind of like how Fiddlin' Arthur Smith did it with his E-major B part. Therein lies the beauty of playing these traditional tunes: bringing an old melody into new territory while also preserving the history of how it got there. **AG**

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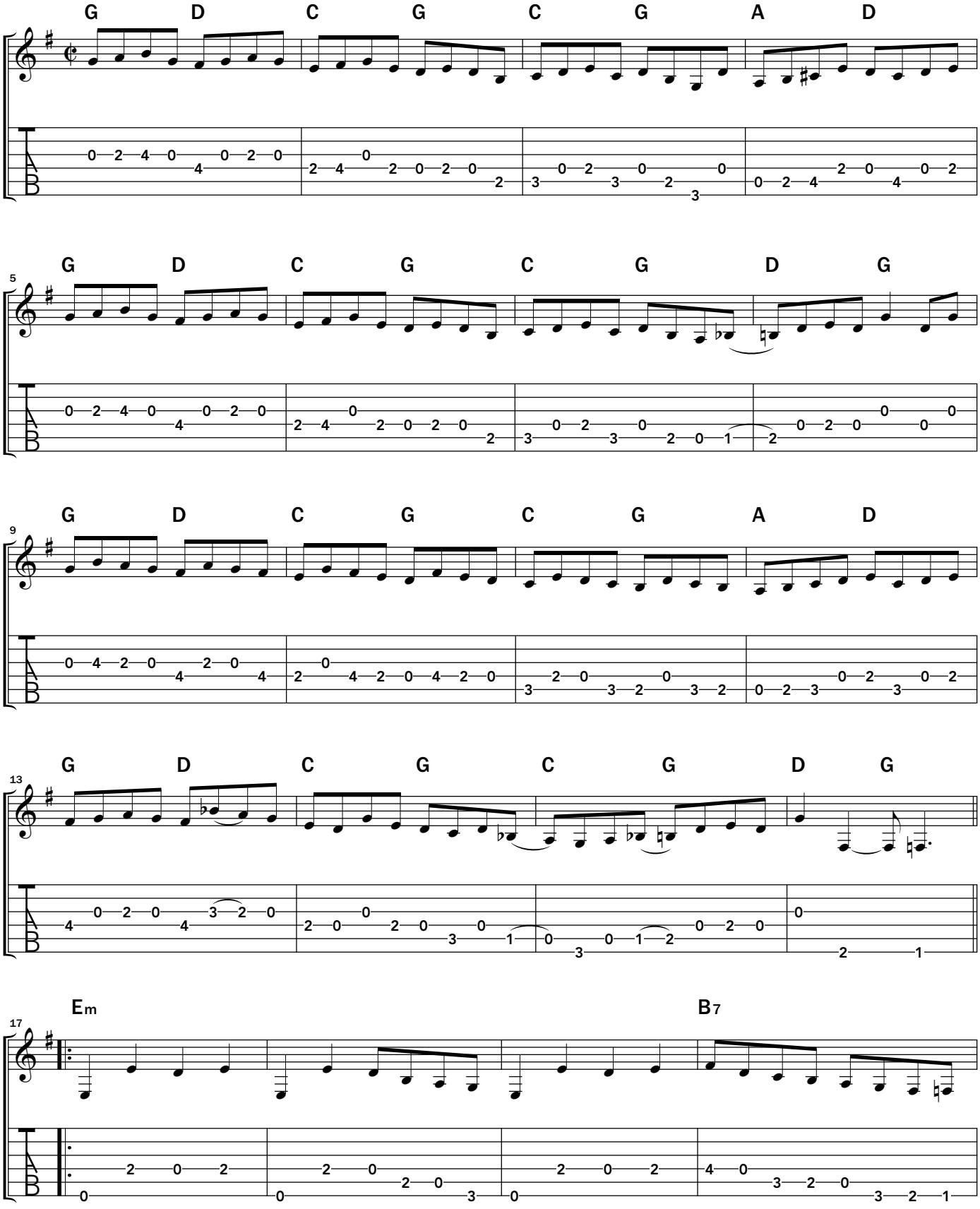




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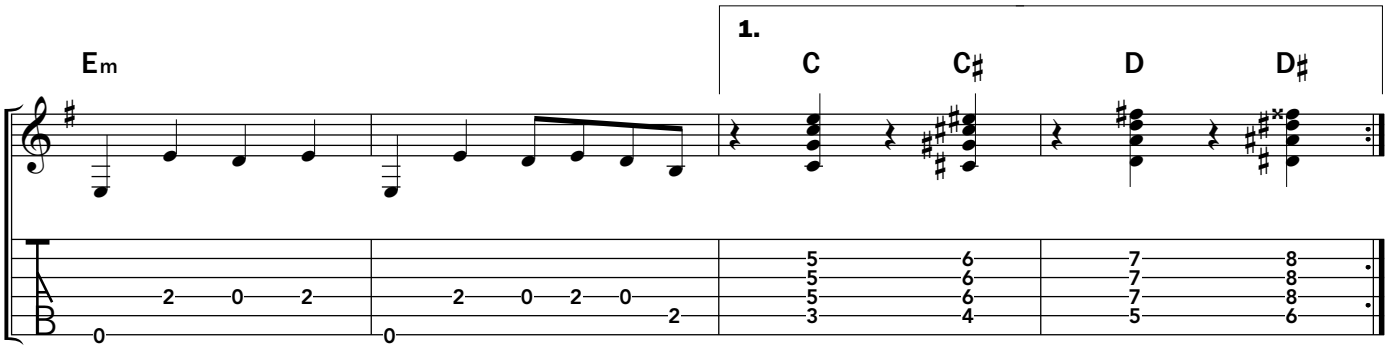
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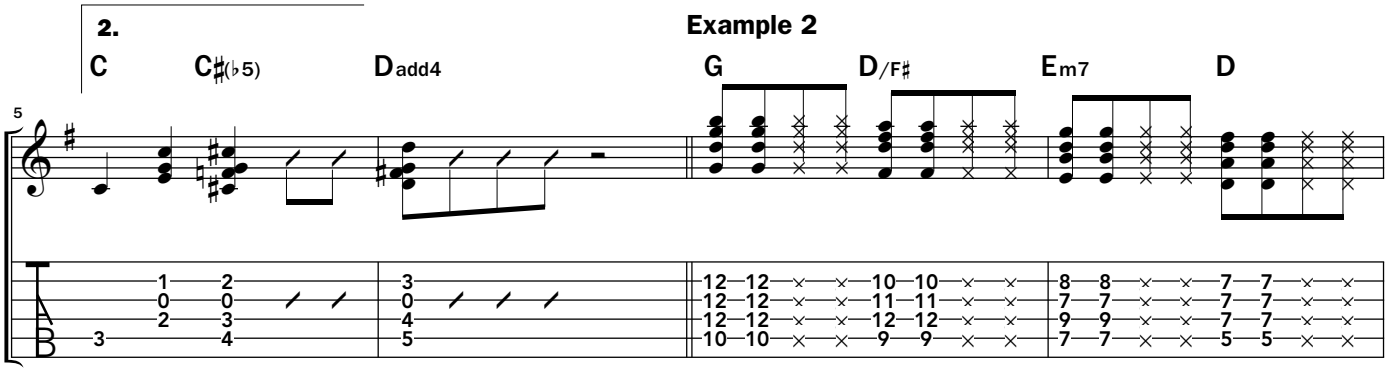
Available in print and digital formats. Both editions include video instruction.

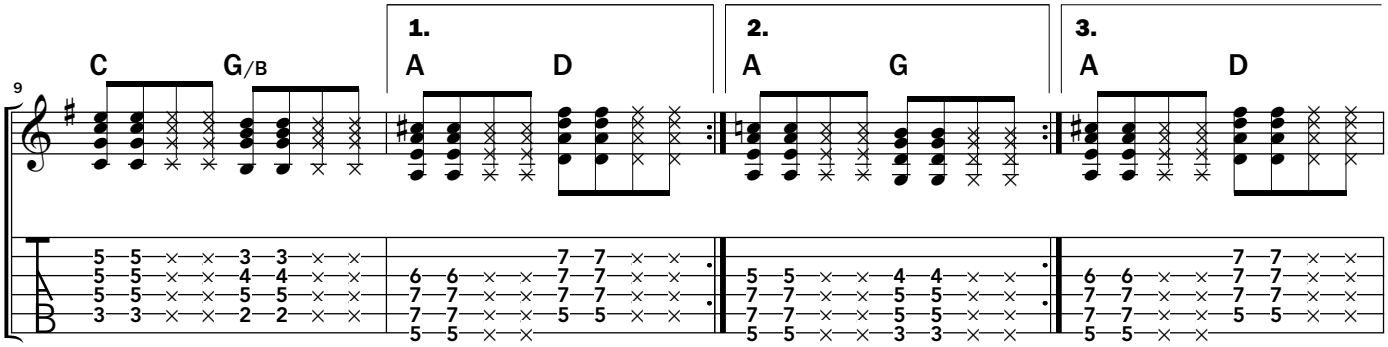
Example 1

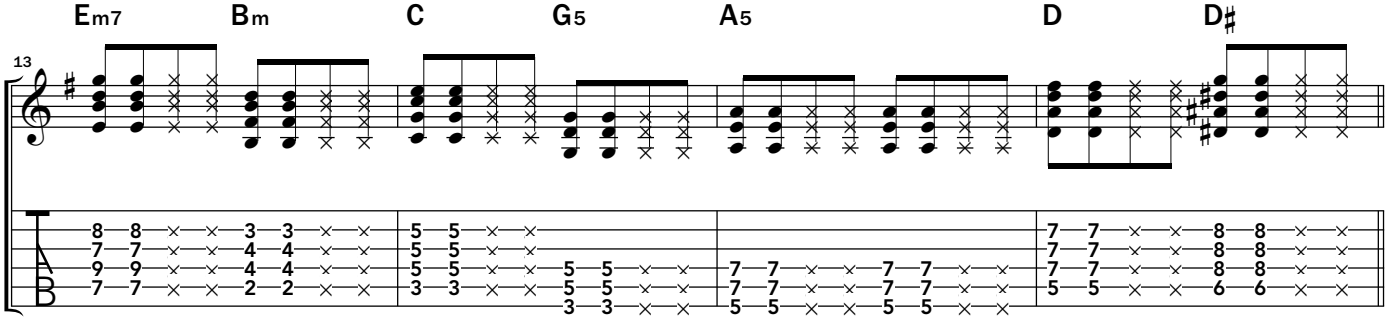


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Em
1.
C
C♯
D
D♯


2.
Example 2
C
C♯(♭5)
Dadd4
G
D/F♯
Em7
D
5


C
G/B
1.
A
D
2.
A
G
3.
A
D
9


Em7
Bm
C
G5
A5
D
D♯
13

Low Bridge, Everybody Down

A nostalgic song about mule-powered barges of the 19th century

BY MAURICE TANI



Maurice Tani

Dating way back to the early 1900s, "Low Bridge, Everybody Down" (aka "The Erie Canal Song") is well over a century old. The song takes a nostalgic look even farther back, to the mid-1800s, when traffic on the upstate New York canal consisted mainly of barges towed by mules, eventually replaced by engine power.

In 1912, when Thomas S. Allen wrote and recorded "Low Bridge," the Erie Canal was being absorbed into the New York State Barge Canal System and the era of mule power was romanticized with a longing for the good old days. So, here we are in the 21st century, looking back at a song from the early 20th century that memorializes the mid-19th century. That's some nostalgia for you!

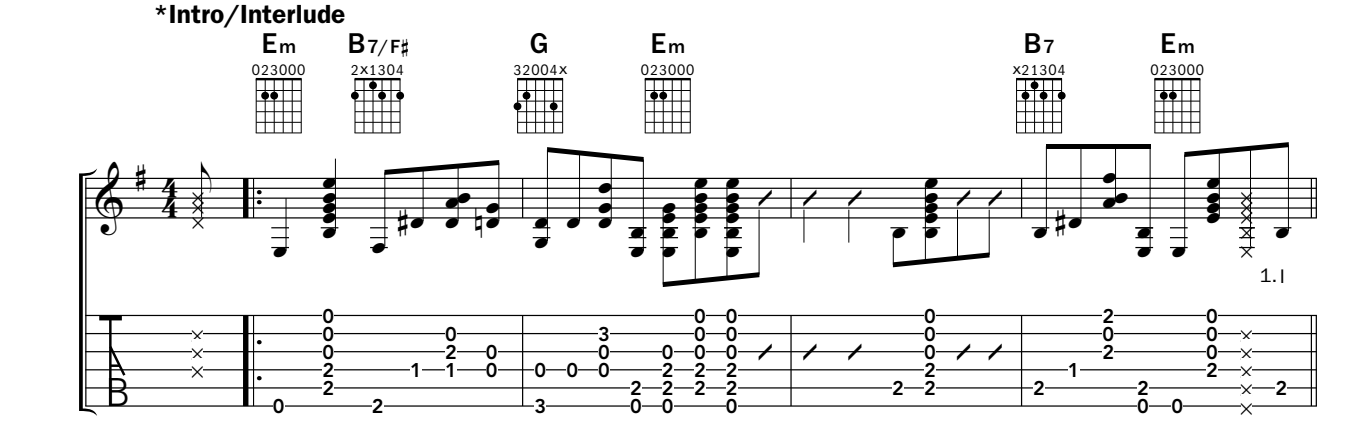
The popularity of "Low Bridge" came in two major waves, first in the early 20th century, through recordings by singers such as Billy Murray and Vernon Dalhart. In the postwar folk era that lasted well into the 1960s, versions by Pete Seeger, the Weavers, the Kingston Trio, and others made the song a staple in the pantheon of folk music.

As with most traditional numbers, there have been variations in the style and lyrics over the years. One of the most conspicuous differences has been the change from Allen's original line of "15 years on the Erie Canal" to "15 miles on the Erie Canal." (Fifteen miles was the average distance a mule would tow a barge before resting or being relieved by another mule.) Use whichever lyric your prefer—hey, it's your call when you're the singer.

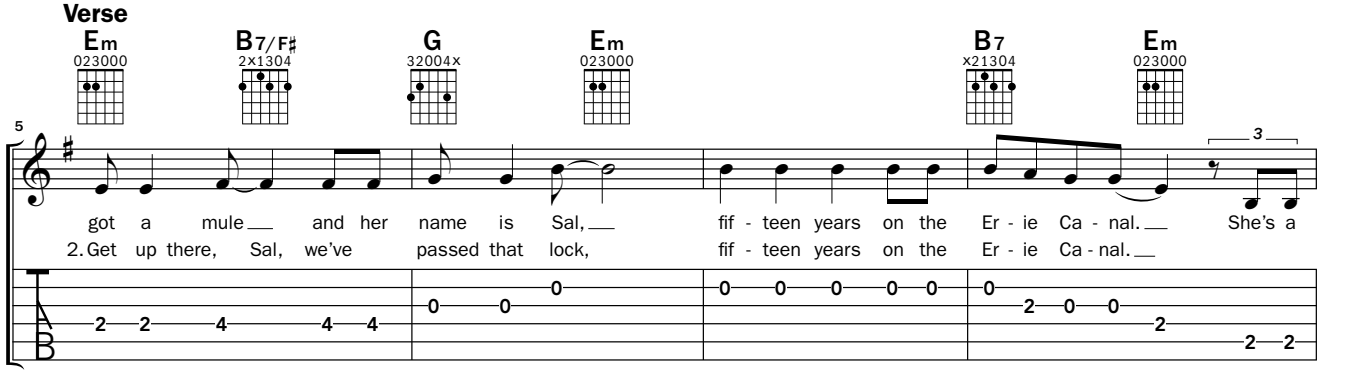
For this arrangement I use a common boom-chuck strum pattern and simple open chords. The progression itself is relatively basic but has some cool touches. I particularly like the recurring sequence of chords—E–B7/F♯–G–Em with a stepwise bass line motif (E to F♯ to G)—that's used throughout the song. It's no more difficult to play the B7 chord with the fifth (F♯) rather than the root (B) in the bass in these passages, but it gives you a distinctive lifting movement that really draws the listener in. AG

LOW BRIDGE, EVERYBODY DOWN

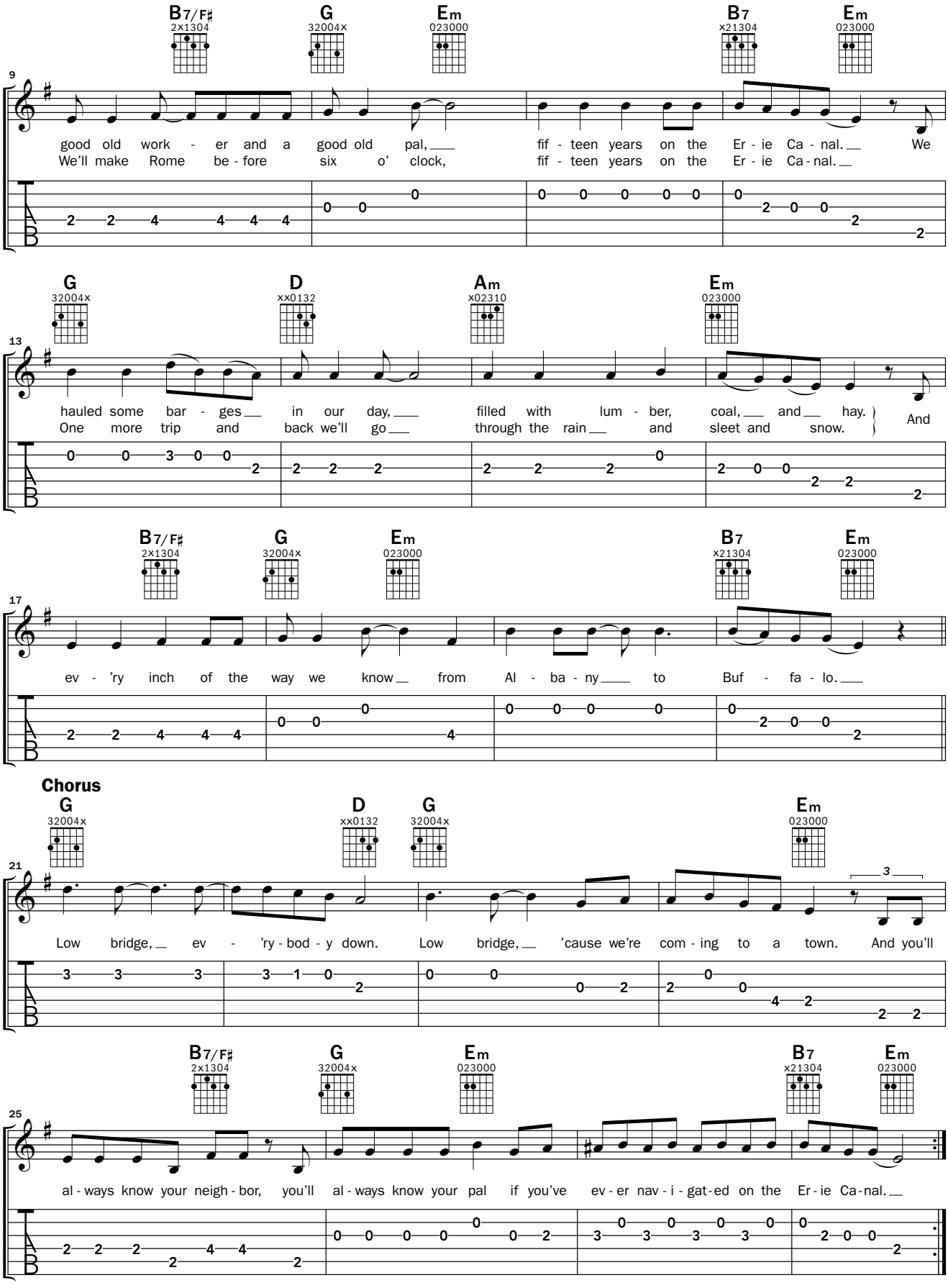
WORDS AND MUSIC BY THOMAS S. ALLEN



**On the video, Maurice Tani uses this four-bar chord sequence as an outro as well.*



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B7/F♯ 2x1304
G 32004x
Em 023000
B7 x21304
Em 023000
9
good old work - er and a good old pal, fif - teen years on the Er - ie Ca - nal. We
We'll make Rome be - fore six o' clock, fif - teen years on the Er - ie Ca - nal.
G 32004x
D xx0132
Am x02310
Em 023000
13
hauled some bar - ges in our day, filled with lum - ber, coal, and hay.
One more trip and back we'll go through the rain and sleet and snow.
And
B7/F♯ 2x1304
G 32004x
Em 023000
B7 x21304
Em 023000
17
ev - 'ry inch of the way we know from Al - ba - ny to Buf - fa - lo.
Chorus
G 32004x
D xx0132
G 32004x
Em 023000
21
Low bridge, ev - 'ry - bod - y down. Low bridge, 'cause we're com - ing to a town. And you'll
B7/F♯ 2x1304
G 32004x
Em 023000
B7 x21304
Em 023000
25
al - ways know your neigh - bor, you'll al - ways know your pal if you've ev - er nav - i - gat - ed on the Er - ie Ca - nal.

Room to Improve

How a budget guitar can be transformed into something better

BY MARTIN KEITH

Q: Is it possible to make a less expensive guitar sound and play better? If so, what do you recommend doing?
—Carmen Shaw

A: This is a simple question with a complicated answer. Actually, to really tackle the subject, we'll have to consider quite a few different areas. Let's start with the easiest one—playability.

Most inexpensive instruments on the market these days are fairly well-made, especially compared to the budget guitars of yore. Many of the weaknesses of those older bargain guitars—rough, poorly installed frets; soft plastic nuts and saddles; ineffective truss rods and sloppy tuning machines—have been addressed in the modern production process. I've played quite a few cheap guitars recently that had admirably level, well-dressed frets, decent tuners, and very good truss rods.

However, nearly any brand-new factory guitar can benefit from a careful setup by an attentive luthier. Every player is different, and no single setup can accommodate everyone's preferences. Furthermore, the retail environment is not kind to instruments, and it's pretty common to see guitars on the showroom floor that are badly in need of some routine adjustment.

A skilled setup tech can make a few basic adjustments that will make a world of difference in playability. The big three are the truss rod, nut slots, and saddle; by dialing in these three variables, nearly any guitar can be set up to suit the player's preference. Ten minutes of work on the nut alone can make a tremendous difference in playability and feel.

The exception is the occasional case where the guitar's neck angle is not correctly set—I have seen this on brand-new guitars whose prices varied widely, from $500 to almost $3,000! When buying an acoustic, I suggest checking the neck angle with this very simple rule of thumb: sight down the neck from the headpiece towards the body. The plane of the frets should line up nicely with the top of the bridge (not the saddle, but the wooden bridge itself). You can also check this by laying a ruler or other straightedge on the frets themselves, and seeing if the end lands nicely on, or very close to, the top of the bridge. If the guitar doesn't pass this test, then it may need more extensive work in order to play correctly.

Most inexpensive guitars on the market these days are fairly well-made.



FRANK CHAMAKI

Now, onto the bigger question: Can an inexpensive instrument be made to sound better? This is a tough one, and it depends quite a bit on what improvements the player is hoping for. There are hundreds of products on the market designed to improve your tone: exotic bridge pins, high-tech composite nuts and saddles, assorted string alloys, soundhole inserts, and more. The first step is to identify which part of your tone you'd like to change, and then try to find the best route towards that.

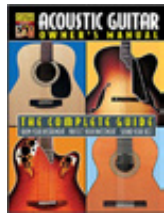
The nut and saddle are traditionally made of bone—an organic material that can be brittle to machine, and can vary from piece to piece. Modern factory instruments frequently use composite materials to simplify manufacturing and improve consistency. However, many players feel strongly that replacing the composite parts with bone enhances the sound of the guitar, and my experience confirms that—I usually hear an improvement with a bone saddle installed. This is a simple and fairly inexpensive job, and is frequently already part of the basic setup that most new guitars will need, so it's a nice easy place to start.



Martin Keith

GOT A QUESTION?

Uncertain about guitar care and maintenance? The ins-and-outs of guitar building? Or another topic related to your gear? Ask *Acoustic Guitar*'s repair expert Martin Keith by sending an email titled "Repair Expert" to Editors.AG@stringletter.com and we'll forward it to Keith.



If your question is selected for publication, you'll receive a complimentary copy of *AG*'s *Acoustic Guitar Owner's Manual.*

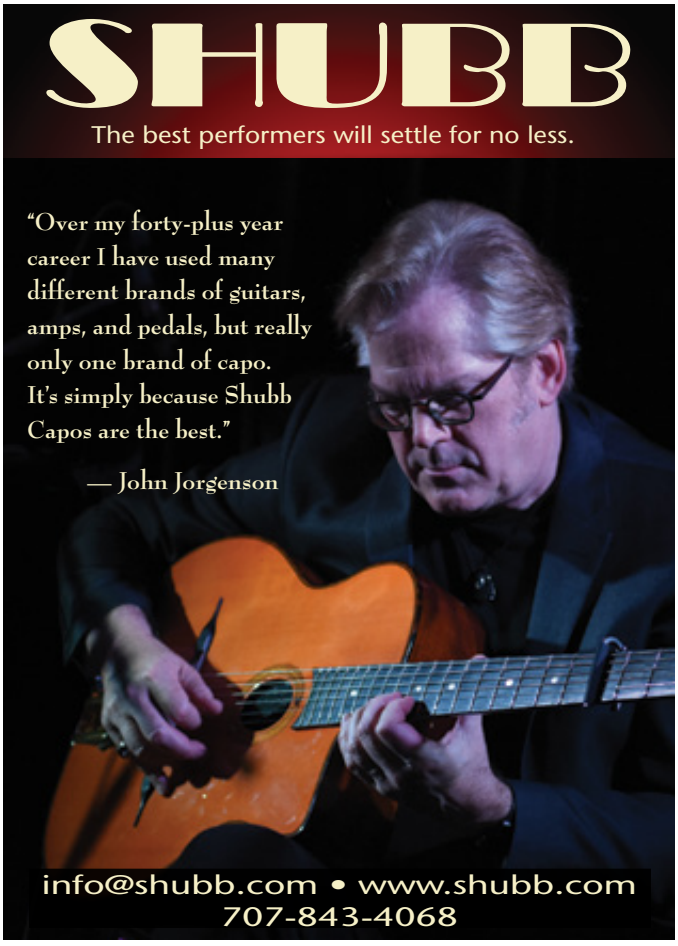
Not much can be done to dramatically increase the volume of an acoustic instrument, or its basic character—a dreadnought, for instance, will always sound more or less as expected. Some products, such as D'Addario's O-Port, play with the main resonant frequency by altering the behavior of the air that passes in and out of the soundhole. The result will be a modest change to the frequency response, which may or may not be what you are after. This effect is similar to changing the EQ on a voice recording—the tone will change, but the speaker's identity will still be recognizable.

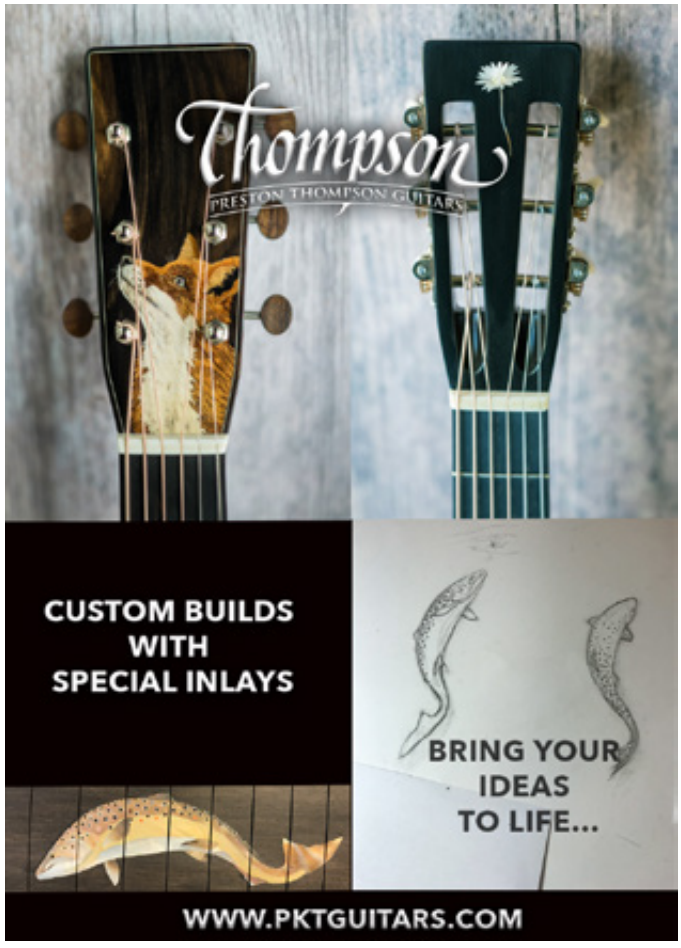
The topic of bridge pins was covered in a prior column, but I'll touch on it again just to say that, in most cases, the subtlety of the differences they make is not likely to be noticeable on less-expensive factory instruments. As with many of the aftermarket tone-improving devices, the effects are always more evident on instruments with light, responsive tops, and most factory instruments are not built lightly enough to make the most of these improvements.

In recent years, a few "play-in" products, like the ToneRite, have been introduced to the market that use an electric shaker to vibrate the guitar vigorously to accelerate the break-in process that typically comes with years of regular playing. I have heard the full range of opinions on these devices, from pure skepticism to wide-eyed evangelism. Some players and makers whose opinions I trust have said that these devices can be helpful. Others have said that the improvements are temporary. I have no direct experience with these devices, so all I can offer is that these kinds of tonal changes can be very hard to evaluate objectively.

As a repairperson, I have to end with a word of caution: Beware of people who offer to modify guitars by shaving down the bracing, removing "unnecessary" braces, thinning the headpiece, or any of the other irreversible changes I've seen done to guitars. There are folks out there who routinely do these and other things in an attempt to open up or otherwise improve guitars—and then, later on, there are those of us who try to repair those instruments after they have caved in, cracked, or otherwise failed. The most experienced luthiers can make exquisitely subtle adjustments to a guitar's voice by carefully shaving the bracing *during assembly*, tap-tuning the top and measuring deflection until everything is just right. However, it is next to impossible to do this kind of work accurately through a soundhole, and many otherwise decent guitars have been ruined in an attempt to make them just a little bit better. As my mom used to say, "Better is the enemy of good."

After all is said and done, the most honest advice I can give is to get the best guitar you can afford, and get it set up to play right for your style and preference. If it doesn't give you everything you want from an instrument, save up and buy another one that does. None of the products on the market can make a lousy guitar into a good one; they can only help make a good guitar sound a little different. There are many good choices in the budget range these days, and a never-ending stream of quality used instruments that offer excellent value. After years of trying to modify instruments to get the sound I was chasing, it was a revelation to find one that simply had the sound from the outset. Wonderful and inspiring guitars can be found at every price point—I work on them every day. Try as many guitars as you can, and eventually the right one will find you. **AG**





Taylor 724ce

A stunning all-koa Grand Auditorium guitar with exceptional warmth and balance

BY GREG OLWELL

In recent years, good-quality acacia koa—an unforgettably beautiful wood that grows only in the Hawaiian Islands—has become harder for luthiers to source. But thanks to Taylor Guitars' koa reforestation efforts on the Big Island of Hawaii, the company has managed to build a stock of this prized tonewood. With access to visually stunning, straight-grained sets, Taylor is adding all-koa guitars to its popular 700 series. The new 724ce and its slightly smaller, grand concert–sized 722ce sibling are built with dramatically colored koa; ultra-thin, open-pore matte finishes; and elegant appointments. I checked out the 724ce and must say that Taylor has knocked it out of the park with this koa beauty.

BEAUTIFUL INSIDE AND OUT

With intense coloring ranging from light khaki sapwood to dark chocolate brown streaks, the koa used on the review guitar is beautiful enough to stop you in your tracks. But, as anyone who's ever played an all-koa guitar can tell you, koa is more than just a visual feast. It's an exceptional tonewood capable of a unique presence and timbre that can really highlight your music.

Some tone fiends describe all-koa guitars as sounding part mahogany and part maple, with lots of midrange warmth and rich tones that mature with playing. This certainly rings true for the 724ce, which possesses a sweet, warm voice with snappy and smooth highs that are more refined than most other koa guitars I've played—more on that in a bit.

From the stained maple pickguard to the body's Indian rosewood binding and ebony truss-rod cover and headplate, natural materials and textures abound on the 724ce. The guitar's light finish adds to the instrument's organic, woody feel. The headstock and fretboard debut Taylor's new mother-of-pearl fountain inlay, and a paua shell rosette lends a Pacific Island vibe.

The 724ce features a 16-inch-wide Grand Auditorium body, one of Taylor's signature guitar shapes. Its proportions make for an all-purpose instrument that hits a sweet spot for strummers and fingerstyle players alike. The



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS

Grand Auditorium is fairly lightweight and very comfortable to cradle while sitting or standing (a button installed on the treble side of the neck heel makes it strap-ready). Its gently sloped Venetian cutaway is an attractive way to make room at the higher frets. Inside the body is Taylor's signature V-Class bracing (see "Taylor Rolls the Dice—Again" in the May 2018 issue of *AG*).

The 25-1/2-inch-scale mahogany neck is classic Taylor: slim, sleek, and utterly playable. It's capped with a West African ebony fingerboard, responsibly sourced, like all of Taylor's ebony, from the company's mill in Cameroon. A black Tusq nut matches the ebony, and at 1-3/4 inches wide, the neck's proportions have a familiar and comfortable feel. The fretwork is perfect, a testament to an attentive setup and properly seasoned wood, with no unevenness or sharp fret ends to deal with, even during a late summer dry spell in Northern California. And, in the long run, it's nice knowing that if the guitar ever needs a neck reset, Taylor's genius neck-attachment-and-shim scheme will make that repair quick and affordable.

SWEETLY VOICED

It's impossible to say if it's due to the proprietary bracing, meticulous construction, body shape, or carefully chosen woods, but the 724ce's sound is more balanced to my ears than any other koa guitar I've played. With an impressive midrange and a tight low end that's never mushy or boomy, it has the characteristic warmth and sweetness that comes with a hardwood-topped instrument. The guitar's overall tone is crisp and dry, with a rich midrange that seems to connect the bass and treble notes into a single sound. There is exceptional low-end clarity, which is especially good for flatpicked bass note runs in standard tuning or fingerpicked parts in open tunings.

The 724ce's sound is more balanced to my ears than any other koa guitar I've played.

But the treble range is where the 724ce seems particularly special, from chords to single notes. Where many koa guitars can sound a little brittle and zingy on the high end, the guitar's upper strings ring with a lacy high-end sweetness and a snappy, quick response that is also smooth and refined. To make a visual analogy, the 724ce's treble response is bright and warm like an Edison bulb, compared to the harshness of a corner store's LED lights that some other koa guitars project.

Something about the sound of this guitar kept sending me in different musical directions. I jumped from strumming 1970s soft-rock classics to slack-key fingerpicking in open G and D minor. Though I didn't have any gigs during my time with the 724ce to test its amplified tone in a real-world setting, I plugged it in and confirmed that Taylor's Expression System 2 electronics package is as good as I remembered. It's accurate, responsive, and capable of delivering textured tones at high volume—which is all you can ever ask for in a pickup.

A SPECIAL TREAT

If you're a fingerpicker who wants a responsive guitar that not only feels great but delivers a very balanced tone, it's worth seeking out the Taylor 724ce. It's an exceptionally comfortable instrument with an easy-playing neck, a resonant feel whether fingerpicked or flatpicked, and a shape that doesn't ask you to reach or stretch to get into position. At $3,499, the 724ce is a moderately expensive guitar, but from its balanced sound to its beautiful woods, it offers so much in return. Right from the first strum, it's a joyful, rich-sounding instrument, but it's a special treat knowing that the sound will get even richer as the koa gets played more and more. AG



SPECS

BODY Grand Auditorium shape with Venetian cutaway; solid koa top, back, and sides; V-Class bracing; maple and black maple purfling with Indian rosewood binding; paua shell and Indian rosewood rosette; dark-stained figured maple pickguard; water-based matte finish

NECK 25-1/2"-scale tropical mahogany neck with scarf neck joint; 1-3/4" black Tusq nut; 20-fret ebony fingerboard with 15" radius and shell/mother-of-pearl fountain inlay; Taylor 18:1 sealed tuners with polished bronze finish; water-based matte finish

OTHER Taylor Expression System 2 electronics; Elixir Phosphor Bronze light gauge strings (.012–.053); brown hardshell case; limited lifetime warranty; available left-handed

PRICE $3,499 street

MADE IN United States

taylorguitars.com

Takamine CRN-TS1

This stage-ready dreadnought can do loud—but can it also do lyrical?

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

If you ask me, the Takamine CRN-TS1 needs a more evocative model name—something, anything, that captures this acoustic-electric slope-shouldered dreadnought's combination of style and utility, brawn and beauty. First, the style: The CRN-TS1 stands out visually by combining familiar elements in a distinctive way. The most striking example is the slotted headstock, but there are other more subtle details that enhance the instrument's traditional-but-updated character—from its honey-tinged natural finish to the understated appointments of gold, ivoroid, abalone, and faux tortoiseshell. Add the qualities that Takamine fans expect—playability and stage-worthy electronics—and you *almost* have the full story. Spoiler alert: the "Wait, there's more!" is all about the unplugged sound.

ROBUST CONSTRUCTION

The CRN-TS1 is a large instrument designed to deliver a full-bodied acoustic sound. Despite having plenty of volume, it doesn't look bulky and is plenty comfortable to hold and play. Handmade at the Takamine Pro Series facility in Sakashita, Japan, the guitar is noticeably well built, from perfect fretwork to tidy bracing and kerfing inside the box.

The body features a solid sapele back, laminated sapele sides, and a solid thermal (i.e., torrefied) spruce soundboard, claimed to lend the tone and response of a vintage guitar. It's always hard to know how much one specific design element influences the sound of an acoustic instrument, so I can't say for sure that the thermal top is more responsive than a non-torrefied top would be on the same guitar. But I can report that this Takamine has a big, complex, and vibrant tone full of shimmering overtones. It's also capable of truly impressive sustain.

The mahogany neck joins the body at the 12th fret, another tone-focused design choice. All other things being equal, a 12-fret design shifts the bridge toward the endpin and away from the soundhole, which is intended to produce a warmer sound than a 14th-fret joint. Of course, a 12th-fret joint also makes the body more of an obstacle for reaching higher pitches.



COURTESY OF TAKAMINE

The rosewood bridge houses a two-piece saddle made of bone; the lower four strings sit on one section, the top two on the other. Takamine believes its split design offers better intonation than standard one-piece compensated acoustic saddles. If you're worried that separating the strings negatively affects sympathetic resonances, the CRN-TS1 certainly doesn't suffer from any lack of tone production. In fact, the unwound high strings sound stronger and clearer than I'd expect from a dreadnought, where upper midrange resonances can smear together.

TOP-NOTCH SETUP AND PLAYABLITY

Considering that almost any guitar right out of the shipping container would benefit from a proper setup, the action on the test instrument was exceptional—low but buzz-free. And while the CRN-TS1 doesn't necessarily offer easy access above the 15th fret, the action up the neck is still silky and true.

For a dreadnought, the Takamine's ovangkol fretboard is relatively short (24.8-inch scale vs. the 25.4-inch you'd find on, say, a Martin D-28) and also slender at the bone nut (1.67-inch vs. the wider standard of 1.75). The 12-inch fretboard radius is a little rounder than you'll find on traditional flattops, but if you're used to a 14-inch radius it'll probably feel natural enough.

Taken together, those specs will probably feel pretty familiar to electric players who spend more of their time with narrower nuts and 10- or 12-inch radii. I find the neck to be comfortable all-around, an easy reach for both chords, fingerstyle arpeggios, and single-note lead lines.

The neck feels fat and ample, with a rounded C curve. I've always liked chunky necks because they support my long fingers, but I don't think the Takamine's proportions would be overwhelming for smaller hands. The full, round contour encourages hand positions that support my fingers on the fretboard. It's not so much about reaching notes and chord shapes more easily, but about making solid contact when you do. And nothing affects tone more than the contact your fingers make with the strings.

IN ACTION

I've already mentioned the Takamine's lush tone and resonant sustain. Those qualities jump out when I play and hold single notes on the high E string, even with a light thumb attack. There is ample body to the sound no matter what I play.

Switching to arpeggiated open chords shows off the instrument's balance and response to finger attack. When playing a descending bass line from an open D, for example, the bass notes on the A string sound consonant and mix well with the higher notes in the chord.

This consonance is even more impressive when it comes to close-voiced triads on the interior strings up the neck (e.g., an E chord voiced at frets 7, 6, and 4 on strings 5, 4, and 3, respectively). Flatpicked lead lines and melodies show off the guitar's ability to combine a warm core tone with an articulate attack. I like it best for sustained notes and bendy bluesy leads. For fast country picking, I usually prefer the tighter string resistance of a longer scale.

If the Takamine handles the subtle and expressive stuff with grace, it really comes to life when you roll up your sleeves and strum big chords. Think Americana, country rock—any genre where you want, say, an open G chord to jangle at the top and punch hard at the bottom. The tone is big and muscular, but it's lean muscle, with no tubby undertones to muddy the sound. Thanks to the fretboard radius, barre chords are especially easy to play, and they sound huge. With all six strings vibrating clearly, a barred F rings like an open E.

SMART ELECTRONICS

Amplified sound has long been synonymous with the Takamine brand, and the CRN-TS1 is no exception. Here, Takamine's time-tested and proprietary Palathetic undersaddle pickup system, which uses individual piezo elements for each string, feeds a CT-4BII preamp. Controls include volume and a three-band EQ with fixed frequencies and 5dB of boost and cut for each band. There's also an onboard tuner, with a push button that lets you switch between muted and non-muted operation, and you can calibrate the tuner's reference frequency from 438Hz to 445Hz in 1Hz increments.

Because Takamine says the design is tuned to reduce feedback, I tested the CRN-TS1 at higher volume than I normally find comfortable. (The tuner's mute mode came in handy while I was adjusting the amp.) If I face the speaker from about a foot away with the amp well above drum kit volume, sympathetic resonances get the D string vibrating. But under commonsense conditions—e.g., a few feet away from the amp with my body blocking the speaker—the sound is easy to control, even with the bass cranked to 5dB.

More important, the electronics capture much of the guitar's unplugged character, including those rich overtones. Perhaps the split saddle plays a role, but the upper strings maintain the clarity I mentioned earlier without getting spikey in that plugged-in acoustic way. The higher strings sound full on single notes and blend well with the lower strings on chords.

The EQ is effective at shaping, not altering, the tone. Boosting the lows and highs relative to the midrange is perfect for strumming solo, though you might cut the bass in an ensemble. I have my own very scientific metric for undersaddle pickups: quack factor. The higher the quack, the worse the score. Even with the amp turned up loud, no ducks flew in expecting to find friends in my studio. Quack factor: 0.

THE BOTTOM LINE

From its handsome looks to its player-friendly fretboard, big sound, and strong onboard electronics, the Takamine CRN-TS1 seems designed for the stage, especially one shared with electric guitars and drums. Reviewed with that in mind, it ticks all the boxes. Priced on the higher end of moderate at around $1,800 with hard case, it's within reach for working musicians and would be a good option for touring pros.

Yet, the unamplified sound, with its combination of clarity and harmonic overtones, makes the CRN-TS1 more than an elegant yet reliable tool. For a big guitar with a big sound, the Takamine also offers an intimate quality that rewards an uncluttered approach, where notes are given the time and space to linger. AG

SPECS

BODY 12-fret slope-shouldered dreadnought; thermal spruce top; solid sapele back; laminated sapele sides; ebony bridge; bone compensated saddle with 2.086" string spacing; natural gloss finish

NECK 24.8"-scale mahogany; slotted headstock; bound ovangkol fretboard with 12" radius; 20 frets; 1.67" bone nut; gold open-gear tuners

OTHER D'Addario EXP16 Phosphor Bronze strings (.012–.053); Takamine Palethetic undersaddle pickup system with CT-4BII preamp; hardshell case; left-handed available

MADE IN Japan

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COURTESY OF SCHERTLER

Schertler Giulia X

Compact, straightforward amp boasts plenty of great tones

BY MARK GOLDENBERG

Squarely in the good-things-come-in-small-packages camp, the Swiss-made Schertler Giulia X is a compact and great-sounding amplifier offering great flexibility and ease of use. Putting out 70 clean watts, it's ideal as a rehearsal or studio amp, and can also be used as a preamp or DI in a larger setting.

At first blush, the sound coming out of the speakers is surprisingly clear and warm, with plenty of low end, thanks to the two-way bi-amped bass reflex cabinet, which houses a 1-inch dome tweeter and coaxial 5.5-inch woofer. But the Giulia X does more than just provide a reliable amplified sound. I tested it using a handful of different guitars and pickups and was impressed by the abundance of great tones the amp delivers.

SOLID BUILD AND INTUITIVE OPERATION

The Giulia X is available in either a black or dark-brown wood finish. I reviewed the latter and, removing it from the shipping box, was pleased as much by the amp's handsome appearance as its light weight (16.5 pounds) and clean construction—not to mention its comfy leather handle.

The amp is intuitive to use. All of the controls, inputs, and outputs are logically arranged on the top panel. From left to right, there's an XLR input for a mic; two phantom power buttons, 24 and 10 volts, respectively; a 1/4-inch instrument input jack; gain controls for the mic and instrument channels; three-band EQ; a Warm button; reverb and master volume controls; 1/4-inch insert and line-out jacks; and finally, an XLR DI out. All of the controls and buttons feel solid and tight.

The EQ section includes low, middle, and high knobs, with a center detent for flat frequency response; to boost turn right, and to cut turn left. These knobs—along with the Warm button, which cuts the high end a bit—have a wide range and can be used subtly or to radically shape the sound.

NATURAL SOUNDS AND GREAT FLEXIBILITY

I tried out the Giulia X with a variety of guitars: a Collings 001 Mh outfitted with a Trance Audio Amulet pickup-and-preamp system; a 1929 Pickguards–modded Recording King Dirty 30's 000 with a rubber bridge and both a vintage DeArmond magnetic pickup and piezo pickup; and a Maegen Wells archtop with a Lollar Johnny Smith–style mini-humbucker pickup. Also, I used an Ear Trumpet Labs Edwina microphone to check the mic channel and sent the DI out to my Universal Audio Apollo Quad interface, connected to a pair of Mackie HR824 speakers.

I started listening to the guitars with the amp set flat. The Collings sounded great through the Giulia X—extremely natural, with a fairly accurate

take on the low end, and crisp but not shrill highs. I applied a little bit of high end, for that crystal-clear contemporary sound, and only when I maxed out the control did it get a piercing effect. Set up with flatwound strings, the Recording King sounded pretty dark with the DeArmond, but adjusting the amp's midrange control and adding a touch of boost cleaned things up nicely. At the other end of the spectrum, using the guitar's piezo pickup I got an unwanted icepick sound, but I was able to tone it down by simply attenuating the treble a pinch.

My Wells archtop is a clear, open-sounding instrument, and the Lollar mini-humbucker is pleasantly bright. By rolling the tone back on the guitar and engaging the Warm button, I went from a clear, modern guitar sound to a smoky Wes Montgomery–like jazz tone that was fat and buttery.

The Edwina mic sounded full and accurate on the guitars; there was a bit of feedback at higher volume levels, but I was able to suppress it with the EQ controls. One could feasibly use a vocal mic with this amp, too. There is plenty of power on tap here, certainly more than enough for a rehearsal or small gig—though perhaps not enough if your band has a drummer who is a basher. On a bigger stage, you could use the Giulia X as a monitor or preamp and send that signal to the house. The DI sound is pretty much what I heard through the speakers and is buzz-free.

My only complaint about the Giulia X is that while the reverb sound is adequate, I can hear individual repeats in the effect and it sounds fairly metallic at higher levels. But tucked back into the mix a smidge it does the job. And the amp's 1/4-inch insert comes in handy if one would want to use a more deluxe reverb effect pedal.

THE TAKEAWAY

Overall, the Schertler Giulia X is great-sounding, inspiring, fun, and easy to use, with plenty of power for rehearsals and small gigs. Relatively easy on the wallet and definitely easy on the back, it's perfect for anyone looking for a cool and versatile grab-and-go amplifier. Highly recommended! AG

SPECS

AMP 70 watts pure analog power; XLR and 1/4" instrument inputs; XLR DI out; 1/4" line out

SPEAKERS 1" dome tweeter; coaxial 5.5" woofer

OTHER Reverb; three-band EQ; Warm button; 10v and 24v phantom power; 10 2/3" x 7" x 11"; 16.5 lbs

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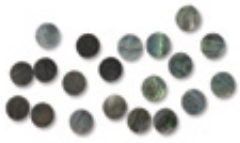
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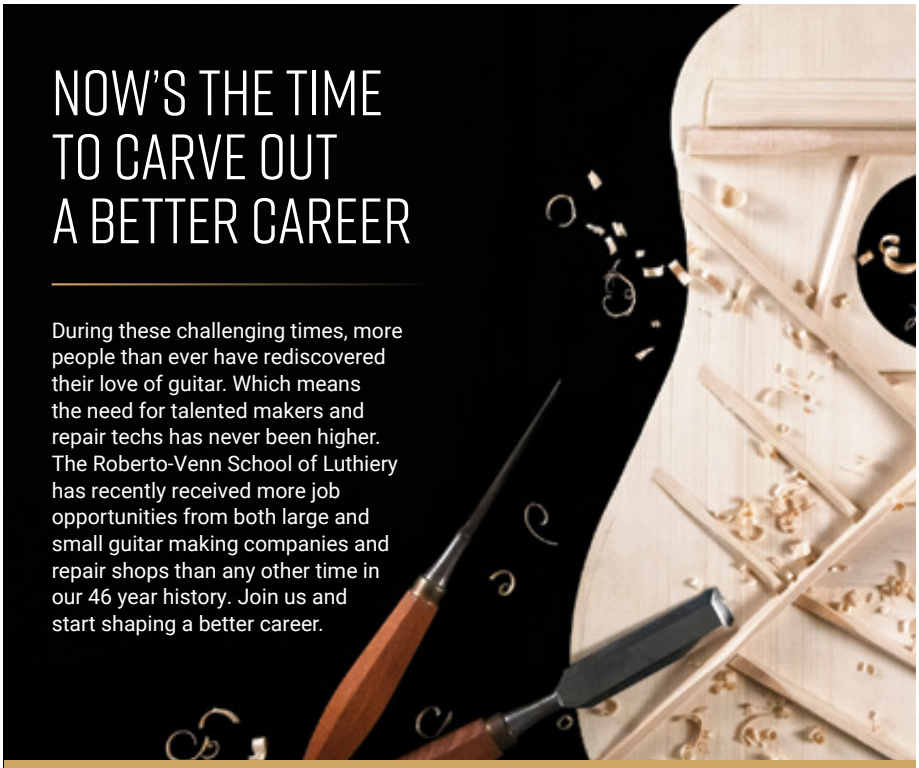


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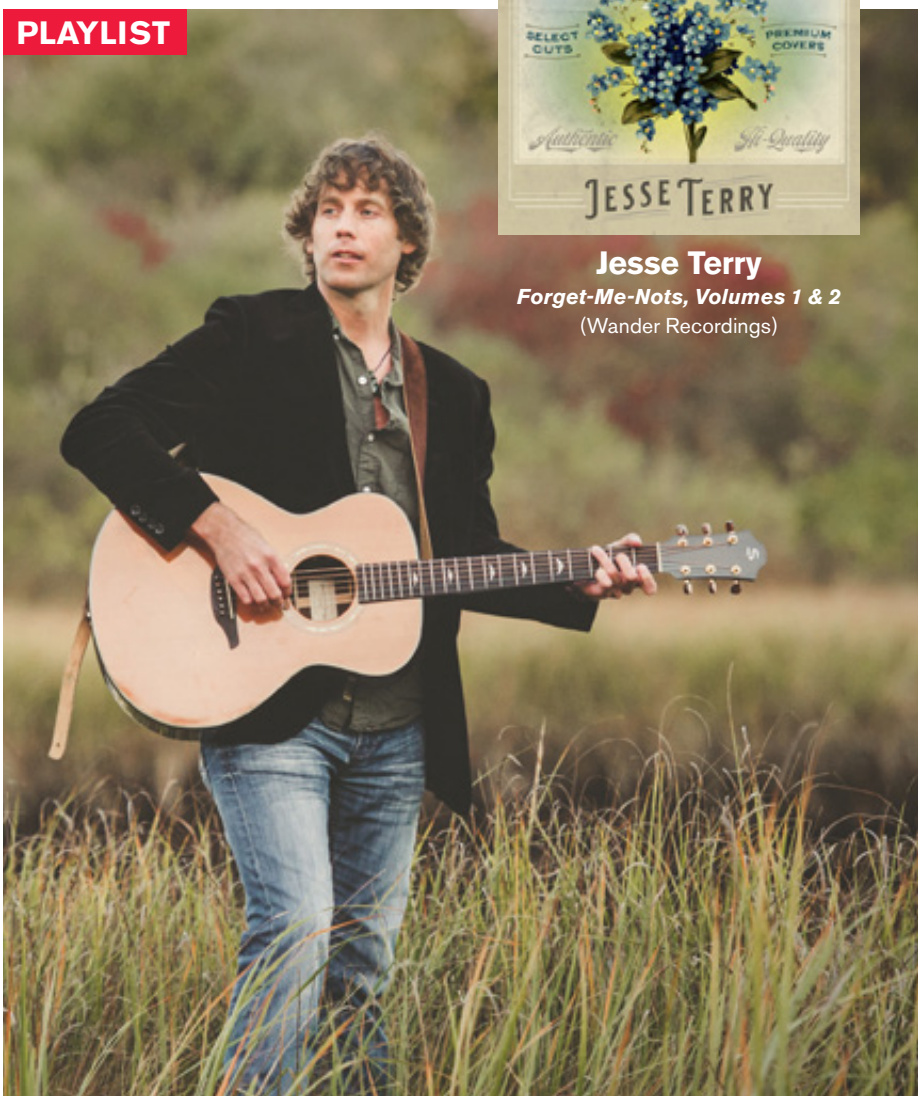
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PLAYLIST



Jesse Terry
Forget-Me-Nots, Volumes 1 & 2
(Wander Recordings)

Remembrance of Songs Past

Singer-songwriter Jesse Terry's covers album is unforgettable

BY BLAIR JACKSON

I am a relative latecomer to the work of Connecticut-based singer-songwriter Jesse Terry. Though he now has eight solo albums under his belt, he wasn't on my radar until the fine 2018 *Sunset Avenue Sessions* collaboration with Lizanne Knott and Michael Logen. I subsequently checked out his earlier albums and came away impressed by the warmth of his vocals, the easy, natural flow of his writing, and his excellent taste in arrangement and production. His 2021 release, *When We Wander*, was uniformly strong, my favorite of his albums of his own songs. He has drawn comparisons to everyone from James Taylor to Glenn Frey to Dan Fogelberg to Jackson Browne; all are apt (particularly the last), yet he definitely has his own distinct singing and writing style.

His latest, *Forget-Me-Nots*, is a departure: a 22-song (2-CD if that's your medium of choice) collection of cover tunes from a wide spectrum of writers, styles, and eras, beautifully presented in (mostly) acoustic settings and featuring a slew of top-flight Nashville musicians and singers unified by Terry's pleasing voice and faultless fingerpicking and strumming. "The main acoustic guitar was my 1972 Alvarez Yairi DY57," he tells us. "I also used a Furch Millennium series G23-CR grand auditorium; a circa 2000 Taylor 810 dreadnought; a Furch Millennium series D23-CR dreadnought-sized 12-string; a nylon-string Furch GNc 4-CR; and, lastly, an Epiphone DeLuxe Masterbilt archtop." Terry also played a Deering Boston six-string banjo.

Chances are you'll know some or most of the songs he's selected, but kudos to him for going off the beaten path with so many unpredictable choices: Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You" (from *Blue*, 1970); Tom Petty's "Walls" (from the soundtrack of *She's the One*, 1996); Townes Van Zandt's "No Place to Fall" (from *Flyin' Shoes*, 1978); Tom Waits' "Hold On" (from *Mule Variations*, 1999); Eric Clapton's "Let It Grow" (from *461 Ocean Boulevard*, 1974); Dylan's "My Back Pages" (from *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, 1964); Jimmy Webb's late-'80s "Adios"; and the Shirelles' 1960 hit "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," to name just some.

A few of the songs are bona fide pop hits I've heard a million times, like "Gentle on My Mind" (Glenn Campbell), "Don't Dream It's Over" (Crowded House), and "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road (Elton John), but I have to say that in these new arrangements sung by Terry I heard the lyrics in a completely new light that made me appreciate them more. Another category of songs is neatly reinvented American standards, including "Skylark," "Some Enchanted Evening," "Twilight Time," "Harbor Lights," and "Someone to Watch Over Me."

Other acoustic guitar players on the album are the always-imaginative Will Kimbrough (also a standout on subtle electric, along with Juan Solorzano), and, on one song, Alan Fish. Eamon McLoughlin contributes violin, viola, and mandolin; Sam Howard is the sturdy electric and upright bassist; Danny Mitchell, piano and organ; singers Mary Bragg and Mia Rose Lynne perfectly complement Terry's singing; and a special tip of the hat to Fats Kaplin for his colorful pedal steel, lap steel, and dobro work. There isn't a note too many nor out of place in these supremely tasteful small-band arrangements—credit there to Terry and his producer (and drummer) Neil Hubbard, who helmed the pandemic-era tracking sessions in South Carolina and, virtually, in Nashville.

With absolutely no negative connotations implied, I'd call this album "easy listening" of the best kind. It's friendly, inviting, familiar-but-original, and will take you to many places worth visiting—again, or for the first time. AG



Trey Anastasio

Mercy

(Rubber Jungle)

Strong solo acoustic excursion for Phish leader

When the Covid Omicron variant forced Trey Anastasio and his mega-popular jam band Phish to postpone their 2021 New Year's Eve festivities, like many of us, he hunkered down for yet another long winter without friends, family, or fun. But Anastasio also channeled his energy into writing a batch of pretty and powerful new songs that he recorded quickly and unaccompanied in this solo acoustic debut. Clocking in at 33 minutes—shorter than many Phish prog-rock jams—*Mercy* contains nine concise, sparsely arranged tunes that put the spotlight on his singing and acoustic guitar work.

The dreadnought guitar on the recordings was commissioned from the Burlington, Vermont, boutique company Circle Strings by Anastasio collaborator and Phish keyboardist Page McConnell. This special instrument features a 100-year-old German spruce top, koa back and sides, and a 75-year-old mahogany neck. A black pearl inlay inspired by a Roy Lichtenstein work was chosen by McConnell, who gave Anastasio the guitar as a birthday present in September 2021.

Anastasio playing this guitar, masterfully layered upon itself and exquisitely captured by engineer Mike Fahey, is reason enough to give this album a listen. The songs are accessible (a challenge in some of Anastasio's earlier work) and rife with metaphorical references to the elements throughout his earnest lyrics: water, waves, rain, snow, light, sun. Almost 40 years into a composing career and more than five years after his first solo acoustic performances, *Mercy* is a welcome addition to Anastasio's varied catalog—and the jams are not missed. *—Donny Emerick*



Cristina Vane

Make Myself Me Again

(Red Parlor)

Slide guitar again takes center stage on album of varied originals

Growing up, singer/songwriter Cristina Vane never really had one place to call home. Born of Sicilian, American, and Guatemalan heritage, the guitarist spent her childhood moving between England, France, and Italy, eventually attending college in the States. Most recently, she's settled in Nashville—and now, on her third studio album, *Make Myself Me Again*, Vane is exploring what it means to reconnect with herself in a new, unfamiliar city where she seems to fit right in.

Make Myself Me Again is a vibrant showcase of Vane's Delta blues fingerpicking and slide guitar style mixed with a touch of rock, her deft guitar work weaving into her equally intuitive vocals. Songs like the title track, "Sometimes Baby," and "Old Enough" address a lyrical motif that centers on discovering a sense of self. On the whole, the album is vivacious—on guitar and voice, Vane finds a balance between being both unassuming and boldly outspoken in her expression.

Guitars on the album include a National resonator, a baritone Mule Resophonic Mulecaster—also known as a Posencaster—as well as a Gibson Les Paul. When she's not in a solo guitar-and-voice setting, you can hear her playing clawhammer banjo on tracks like "River Roll" and "Time for Leaving," and joining her on a handful of the songs are fiddlers Billy Contreras (Belà Fleck) and Bronwyn Keith-Hynes (Molly Tuttle). Between Vane and the ensemble appearances, *Make Myself Me Again* makes for a timeless take on country-rock and blues.

—Kate Koenig



Mary Gauthier

Dark Enough to See the Stars

(In the Black/Thirty Tigers)

More light than darkness on songwriter's latest outing

Dark Enough to See the Stars is what we call a happy album for Mary Gauthier—the happiest album in her career, recorded at the happiest time in her life. At 60, she's enjoying a four-year relationship with Jaimee Harris, relishing a post-pandemic return to touring, and writing songs that find a sweet spot between sad/happy and happy/sad.

The album opens with the anthemic "Fall Apart World," co-written with Harris, which celebrates an escape from the past ("No more waiting/ no more searching/ no more drifting/ no more alone") and an unlikely entry into the present ("You're my girl/ in this broken heart/ fall apart world"). It's a story of redemption, and strumming a 1950 Gibson J-45, Gauthier has never sounded more confident, glowing in the warm, folk-rock support from Neilson Hubbard (drums; he also produced), Fats Kaplin (pedal steel), Danny Mitchell (organ, piano), Michael Rinne (bass), and Juan Solorzano (electric guitar).

The mood continues with "Amsterdam" and "Thank God for You," and even when it shifts mid-album, there's an underlying hopefulness that carries through to the end. It leavens the weariness of "The Meadow," about still feeling the need to run, and "Dark Enough to See the Stars," about feeling loved in the midst of mourning for songwriter friends Justin Townes Earle, Nanci Griffith, David Olney, and John Prine. And though so much of the album deals with loss, there's a buoyancy in these arrangements and an honest, hard-won optimism in the writing.

—Kenny Berkowitz



The Slocan Ramblers

Up the Hill and Through the Fog

(SloMusic)

Canadian bluegrass trio breaks new ground, defies expectations

Hailing from Toronto, the Slocan Ramblers play their bluegrass close to the edge of country, pop, and rock, citing Jim Croce and Jerry Reed as influences and dangling a cover of Tom Petty's "A Mind with a Heart of Its Own" as the album's first "single." By now, they've shown how tightly they can play, and with the benefit of a pandemic year's woodshedding, they're proving how tightly they can write, too.

With IBMA's 2020 Momentum award firmly behind them, the band's songwriters—Frank Evans (banjo), Adrian Gross (mandolin), and Darryl Poulsen (guitar)—bring new strengths to this fourth album, making a clean break from their folk-trad past and establishing three distinctive voices to make the group greater than the sum of its parts. Teasing the conventions of bluegrass heartache, Evans keeps his tongue in cheek, enjoying the word-play of kiss-offs like "Bring Me Down Low" and under-committed-love songs like "I Don't Know." Gross, who teaches music at Concordia University, weighs in with two of the album's smartest, sharpest instrumentals, cleverly defying expectations on "Snow Owl" and "Harefoot's Retreat."

Holding them together, Poulsen contributes the tightest, hottest, foot-tappingest song of all, "You Said Goodbye," which barely tops two-and-a-half minutes in its headlong rush to wrap up a failed romance in three chords and as few words as needed: "You said goodbye/ hung my head and cried/ when you said goodbye last night." Playing a 2014 Collings D1A VN, Poulsen burns through the guitar solo at door-slamming speed, followed by hard-driving breaks from Evans and Gross to add an exclamation point to the band's strongest album yet. *—KB*



Lily Henley

Oras Dezaoradas

(Lior Éditions)

Beautiful and unique collection of old and new Sephardic songs

In 1492, around 300,000 Sephardic Jews faced a terrible quandary: convert to Catholicism, flee their home country of Spain, or risk being killed through the Spanish Inquisition. Some who escaped preserved their culture in song form as they resettled throughout North Africa and the Ottoman Empire.

Historically, Sephardic women were not allowed to sing in liturgical settings, so folk songs became their vehicles for musical expression. The tunes were sung in Ladino—a mixture of Old Spanish, Hebrew, and other languages—endangered and now spoken by fewer than 100,000 people. Melodies were malleable, often reworked to reflect local musical practices.

Not long ago, the brilliant singer-songwriter, guitarist, and fiddler Lily Henley decided to put her own imprint on the tradition. While working on material for a solo album inspired by the American folk tradition, she realized that the melodies she had prepared lent themselves to reworkings of old Sephardic songs already in her repertoire.

The results of this fusion, along with three originals in Ladino, are heard on *Oras Dezaoradas* ("Hours Without Hours"), where Henley offers her unique takes on Sephardic songs while also helping preserve the language. It is not necessary to understand all the history or even the lyrics to appreciate the great beauty of this album, with its neat blend of traditional American sounds and mysterious melodies, its stirring arrangements, and its intricate fingerpicked accompaniments played on two decidedly different guitars—a mid-1960s Harmony Sovereign H1260 and a 1940s Martín 0-18T tenor. *—Adam Perlmutter*



Scott Metzger

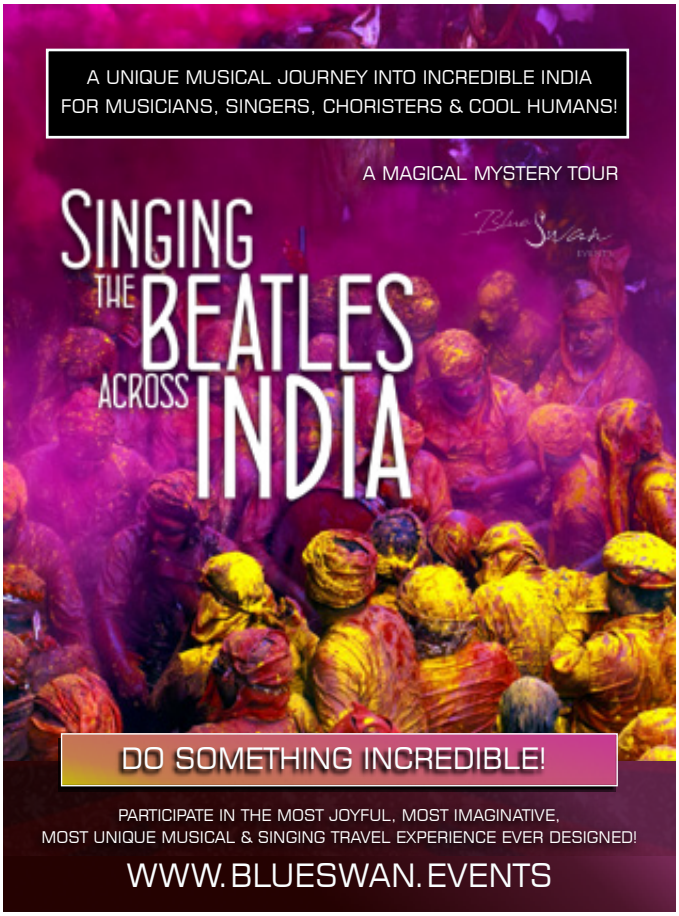
Too Close to Reason

(The Royal Potato Family)

Jam band guitarist's solo debut is an impressive acoustic tapestry

Brooklyn-based guitarist Scott Metzger is widely respected as a versatile electric guitarist who seems to fit well into any band or situation he's plugged into no matter what the style. Nationally, he's best known as a guitarist and singer (along with Tom Hamilton) for the increasingly popular and fabulously inventive Grateful Dead jam band Joe Russo's Almost Dead (JRAD). Like so many musicians, the pandemic left Metzger without gigs and plenty of time on his hands, so he put some of it to very good use making this invigorating solo album of original acoustic guitar instrumentals, most featuring two or three layered guitar tracks. (Only one tune, "Only Child," features an outside player—violinist Katie Jacoby, who happens to be his wife and another NY music fixture.) Before he recorded the album, Metzger bought the beat-up but wonderful-sounding 1955 Martin 000-18 heard throughout.

Stylistically, *Too Close to Reason* covers a lot of territory in what Metzger calls his "sonic landscapes." There's the bouncy, melodic, flatpicking showcase "Don't Be a Stranger"; the moody, jazz-tinged "Talk Like That," sounding like it could be part of a film noir soundtrack; the beautiful two-part "Dream Room," with its hypnotic tambura drone and Indian shadings; the Spanish-influenced "Cafe Hidalgo"; the trippy, electronically altered "Appropriate Wattage"; the slightly Kottke-esque "Asking for a Friend," which features an exciting JRAD-like crescendo; the lilting "Waltz for Beverly"; and more. For me, the only misstep is the cacophonous, freeform "Damage," a space jam (in Dead parlance) that feels out of place. The rest is fantastic. *—BJ*





ADVERTISER INDEX

Acoustic Remedy Cases, acousticremedycases.com....76
Altman Guitars, altmanguitars.com....76
Armadillo Enterprises, lunaguitars.com....83
Augustine Strings, augustinestrings.com....25
Blue Swan Events, blueswan.events....81
Bread & Roses, breadandroses.org....81
C.F. Martin & Co., Inc., martinguitar.com....84
Collings Guitars, collingsguitars.com....7
Duke of Pearl, dukeofpearl.com....77
Eastern Woods Music Publishing, easternwoodsmusic.com....75
Elixir Strings, elixirstrings.com....8,11
Elixir Strings & Yamaha Giveaway, elixirstrings.com....43
Enya Music, enya-music.com....9
Gibson Montana gibson.com....2, 21
Guild Guitars, guildguitars.com....4
Guitar Foundation Of America, guitarfoundation.org....47
Hill Guitar Company, Inc., hillguitar.com....39
Holiday Gift Guide.....53
Honz Technology, LLC, tonewoodamp.com....27
Jewitt Guitars, jewittguitars.com....76
P.K. Thompson Guitars, pkthompsonguitars.com....69
Paul Reed Smith Guitars, prsguitars.com....3
Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery, roberto-venn.com....77
San Francisco Conservatory of Music, sfcm.edu/guitar....54
Santa Cruz Guitar Corp, santacruzguitar.com....35
Shubb Capos, shubb.com....69
Solid Ground Stands, solidgroundstands.com....77
Strings by Mail, stringsbymail.com....37, 75
Sweetwater Sound, sweetwater.com....13

Dick Boak Special Trio

Handsome instruments from the "retired" industry icon

BY GREG OLWELL

Retirement for some people means an RV and the open road, but for former longtime C.F. Martin & Co. employee Dick Boak, it's been a chance to focus on craft. Boak's skills as an illustrator and woodworker (including building nearly 40 guitars before joining Martin) were helpful during the many roles he held during his four-decade tenure with the esteemed company. Since his retirement in 2018, he has continued drawing and hand-building instruments like this recently completed trio.

While each piece would be an attention-grabber on its own, the small-bodied guitar really stands out. Boak calls it the Aardvark, describing it as "somewhat similar to a Weissenborn or an 1850s Renaissance guitar," referring to the very rare shape built by Martin in the mid-1800s. It features an Adirondack spruce top and ziricote back and sides, and is made to be tuned up a perfect fourth, like a standard guitar capoed at the fifth fret.

The dreadnought exemplifies what's possible when technology catches up with a vision. Boak says it's essentially a standard herringbone dreadnought with an Adirondack spruce top and Honduras rosewood back and sides, but with intricate pearl inlays. He originally designed the fancy inlaid pickguard 25 years ago when Martin got a new laser cutting machine—but the company shelved the idea after the nitrate pickguards caught fire.

Jump ahead a couple of decades, and laser-cutting technology has improved. The original drawing was painstakingly digitized by the late Jeremy Chism of Pearlworks. After revisiting the pictures with Martin's Executive Chairman, Christian Frederick Martin IV, Boak expanded the idea by creating harmonizing inlay designs for the headstock, fretboard, and bridge. This opulent guitar became a prototype for Martin's new D-42 Special.

The stunning ukulele was made using a set of quilted maple that was cut back when Boak managed Martin's sawmill in the 1980s. He set it aside for a special project, and few things say special project like a handmade retirement ukulele and its guitar companions.

"A lot of people think I should sell them," Boak says of the trio and the ten other instruments he's built in this later stage of lutherie. "I might, but I didn't build them for that reason. I'm really attached to them, and it would be hard to attach a price tag to them. Every one of them is special to me for a reason." AG

Dick Boak with his ornate dreadnought



MATT KENNEDY



JOHN STERLING RUTH PHOTOGRAPHY

Acoustic Guitar (ISSN – 1049-9261, USPS - 5581) is published bi-monthly by String Letter Publishing, Inc., 941 Marina Way South., Suite E, Richmond, CA 94804. Periodical postage paid at Richmond, CA 94804 and additional mailing offices. Printed in USA. Canada Post: Publications mail Agreement #40612608. Canada Returns to be sent to Imex Global Solutions, PO Box 32229, Hartford, CT 06150-2229. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to *Acoustic Guitar*, String Letter Publishing, Inc., PO Box 91149, Long Beach, CA 90809-1149.


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